

# **Culture, Community and Enterprise in a Hungarian Romany Settlement**

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## Abstract

This thesis is designed to further our understanding of Hungarian-speaking Romany (*Romungro*) culture and, in the context of the post-communist transformation of Hungarian society and economy, to comment on how the values of the Romany community conflict with those of an NGO, the Dignity Foundation, working in the field of Romany community development.

This thesis will contribute to a hitherto neglected aspect of the Hungarian Romany experience by providing an ethnography of Hungarian-speaking Roma. The thesis examines meanings of the terms *Cigány* (Gypsy), *testvér* (extended family) and *zsivány* (crooked) behaviour in the context of the everyday life of a rural settlement.

From enjoying near full employment under state socialism, the Roma in Hungary now find themselves in a situation that sociologists have presented as one of underclass formation. Evidence of entrepreneurial activity presented in the thesis questions the suggestion that all rural Romany groups are forming a post-communist underclass.

The significantly increased role of the civil sector in issues of welfare is one of the most prominent features of the post-communist transformation and this thesis examines some of the consequences of this change. Drawing on the Dignity Foundation's experiences in this community, the thesis comments on the chasm between the values of the NGO and those of the community, in particular their different perceptions of trust and the significance that this has for the effectiveness of projects designed, in part, to encourage local-level civil society. The thesis suggests that local values must be respected by NGOs and others working with Roma for there to be effective dialogue.

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To the Romany inhabitants of Epervár, I can only express my gratitude that they accepted a stranger into their lives with warmth and good humour. I feel privileged to have experienced their unique expression of friendship and family loyalty. Both Katalin and László deserve special thanks as, independently, they both enthusiastically supported my research with wisdom and understanding, showed great patience as I struggled to learn Hungarian, positively included me in the lives of their families and endeavoured to never let me feel lonely.

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## **Introduction**

### **1 General Arguments and Background**

This thesis is designed to further our understanding of Hungarian-speaking Romany culture and, in the context of the post-communist transformation of Hungarian society and economy, to comment on how the values of the Romany community conflict with those of an NGO working in the field of Romany community development. This thesis is a study of Hungarian-speaking Roma, the largest group of Roma in Hungary, regarded by non-Roma and other Romany groups as the most assimilated. Throughout the thesis, I shall illuminate the nature of present day Romany culture among this Hungarian-speaking, apparently ‘assimilated’<sup>1</sup> group. One of the contexts of understanding this marginalized population is to reflect on the most recent economic changes and how these have affected the status of Roma. From enjoying almost full employment under state socialism, in a free market economy the Roma now find themselves in a precarious situation where mass unemployment and the failure of Romany children in schools has led sociologists to argue that a Romany underclass is forming. This thesis examines how widely this model can be applied by looking at the case of the Roma of Epervár. The third strand to the thesis considers current state policy in regard to how best to deal with this sector of the population, in particular the role of the civil sector in protecting and furthering the cause of the Roma. Official assimilation policy has been replaced with a policy of celebrating and protecting multi-culturalism and ethnic difference. There has been a marked change in official policy with the ethnicization of social and ethnic minority policy (see Szalai, 2003). This has entailed the NGO sector carrying out some of the functions that had previously been state-controlled (for a critique refer to Hann, 1996). I shall examine the role of one Budapest-based Romany rights organization in its interactions with the Epervár Romany community and, in doing so, shed light on the cleavages between the assumptions and values of the NGO and those of the Roma that they work with.

Using the experiences of the Roma of Epervár, this thesis shall therefore examine the consequences of the application of a principle that liberal-minded,

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the thesis, I use quotation marks (“”) to indicate quotations and single inverted commas (‘’) to indicate categories or concepts.

ideologically-motivated NGOs are best suited to address the needs of marginalized groups, such as the Roma. Given the nature of ethnographic field research in one community, I do not claim to be able to speak for all the actors of the ever expanding civil sector from the donors, through project implementers to the various beneficiaries. Rather I use the experience of one NGO, with a particular set of concerns, to open up issues of broader interest and concern. Secondly, I shall assess what the Epervár evidence says about the assertion that the ending of socialist assimilationism has led to a growing Romany underclass. And finally, I hypothesize that the ‘assimilated’ *Romungro*<sup>2</sup> continue to live in accordance with their own distinct values at a time that majority-minority relations are becoming more politicised and issues of ethnicity are acquiring greater public prominence and that, in this context, NGOs and others wishing to intervene in Romany communities need to tailor their projects to the local conditions and possibilities as they find them.

By presenting evidence of strategies of entrepreneurship, I argue that it is not inevitable that Hungarian Roma form an underclass. However, an NGO that wishes to encourage income-generation projects, must appreciate the local conditions and community values that inform these local models of entrepreneurship. I begin by introducing the community through exploring key themes and local understandings of ‘Being *Cigány*’ (Gypsy), before focusing on one of the most all-pervasive and influential values, that of relatedness. By identifying the main strategies used by local entrepreneurs in their enterprises, I then argue that there are signs of local innovation, and that allegiance to extended family (*testvér*) need not be detrimental to successful economic enterprises. Having established the main values of the community and illustrated the innovative economic strategies employed, in the penultimate chapter I explore the cleavages between the philosophy and assumptions of the NGO and those of the community as likely explanations of the repeated failure of the NGO’s livelihood projects to make an impact on settlement life.

The thesis therefore touches on another important general feature of the landscape of post-socialist Hungary. With the withdrawal of the state and the introduction of

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<sup>2</sup> *Romungro* is the term for Roma who speak only Hungarian. For a discussion of this term refer to Chapters One and Two.



a free market economy post-1989, the Hungarian civil sector has grown rapidly in response to social welfare issues. In this climate, with Hungary working towards membership of the European Union, the role of the civil sector in improving the situation of the Romany minority has taken on a new significance.<sup>3</sup> The political criteria for accession in regard to minority issues were adopted at the 1993 Copenhagen European Council Criteria, and it is these criteria that Hungary is working towards satisfying. The recent World Bank report (Ringold, Orenstein and Wilkens, 2003:92-111) identifies Hungary as being the leading country in the region in terms of conducting research, establishing Roma-related NGOs, implementing projects and policy setting. The Hungarian civil sector has expanded rapidly, with the number of NGOs growing fivefold between 1989 and 1995 to more than 43,000 registered organizations (Ringold, Orenstein and Wilkens, 2003:94, citing Jenkins, 1999). From a host of policy initiatives, including an Office for National and Ethnic Minorities and the independent Minorities Ombudsman, unique to Hungary is the 1993 Minorities Act that allows minorities to form elected bodies (minority self-governments) to work in partnership with local and national governments. The effectiveness of these minority self-governments is disputed today. One of the criticisms relevant to this thesis is that, in reality, minority self-governments are helping to blur the distinction between poverty and ethnicity at the local level (Molnár and Schafft, 2003:38-39; Szalai, 2003). In regard to Epervár, it is true that the limited resources and restricted authority of the local minority self-government is leading to frustration in the local Romany community (Molnár and Schafft, 2003; Szalai, 2003). In Epervár, the local minority self-government was not particularly supportive of my research, and the President made me feel distinctly unwelcome. For instance, he told me that due to the data protection act I could find out nothing from them about the local Romany population. Settlement inhabitants were equally removed from their local representatives, with a friend of mine visibly quailing at the thought of entering the premises and hiding round the corner to wait for me.<sup>4</sup> In terms of my research, my inability to access the minority self-

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<sup>3</sup> In 1991, Hungary and Poland were the first Central and Eastern European countries to sign association agreements with the EU and since then their relationship has grown so that, following the December 2002 Copenhagen summit, Hungary is expected to take part in the European Parliament elections in June 2004.

<sup>4</sup> When I first visited the settlement on my own to enquire about the possibility of staying there, I was directed to the minority self-government's President's house (a splendid affair in another part of the village to the settlement) where I was told, after enquiring into my political affiliation, that there were no possibility of me staying in the village as there



government (its members were also the entrepreneurs who refused to speak to me for a supposedly separate reason) and the general ambivalence felt towards the minority self-government, simply drew my attention further towards those aspects of life that do have significance for the majority of the settlement inhabitants.<sup>5</sup>

Government policies post state socialism have contributed to an ambiguous situation concerning poverty and ethnicity. The ever-growing civil sector and minority self-governments are products of this new state attitude. As I had limited access to the Epervár minority self-government, in this thesis I focus on the reaction and response of 'assimilated' Roma to a community-development orientated NGO. My main findings touch upon the increasing polarisation of the minority and majority populations as I explore what it is to be *Cigány* today for this group of Roma. I identify distinct community values and demonstrate how these are incorporated into economic strategies that suggest an entrepreneurial spirit denied by underclass theories. Finally, I propose that these values must be respected and recognized by NGOs and others working with the Roma, especially in the field of income generation projects, and highlight points of friction between the assumptions of the NGO and Romany culture.

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This thesis arose from my work as a freelance researcher for the Budapest-based NGO, the Dignity Foundation, in the late 1990s. As a result of this experience, I had planned to evaluate the social impact of a community development/micro-enterprise scheme, however, once I began to try and address my specific research question in the field, I was told that while there was such a project in operation but that the leaders were 'crooked' (*zsivány*) and only employed their own close family members (*család*) and *Magyars* (non-Roma Hungarians). As I explored for myself, I found that my friends' general synopsis was correct. During my time in the village, there was no working Dignity Foundation project, but rather the project leaders were concentrating their efforts on a similarly funded greenhouse

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were simply no empty houses. I later found out that there were numerous empty properties scattered throughout the village, and I did eventually find a temporarily empty property in the settlement itself. In responding to me in this way, the President had made it clear that he did not welcome my presence in the village, but as his influence was limited amongst the inhabitants of the settlement it made no discernible significance to my acceptance into settlement life.

<sup>5</sup> The President of the minority self-government did grant me an interview when I approached him with a friend as translator and László as my 'legitimizing' companion.

project, financed by another NGO on the condition that Roma were employed. However, other than the leaders' two sons, there was no permanent Romany employee. The workers were local, poor *Magyars*. Indeed, the micro-enterprise projects were making no impact on the lives of the settlement inhabitants other than to further fuel the settlement inhabitants' belief in the untrustworthiness of the leaders: they should be employing Roma but were not. As a result the current thesis evolved after a re-evaluation of my initial research question.

Realizing that the Dignity Foundation's income generation programme played a limited role in settlement life, I reassessed my interests and tailored my research to find out the nature of existing economic strategies that had played a significant role in the community. Therefore, throughout my twelve months of fieldwork, my priority was to understand the various economic strategies of the local Romany inhabitants. My findings support the hypothesis that there is an invigorating and flourishing invisible economy stemming from the initiative of local entrepreneurs. Durst (2002) as well as Fleck and Virág (1999), who carried out research in other Hungarian Romany communities, write of patron-client relations and Roma becoming successful through leaving behind their old community ties and disassociating themselves from their fellow Roma, whereas in this thesis I present cases of entrepreneurs who are using their position as Roma and their link to the local community, along with certain strategies of interaction with non-Roma, as the basis for economic enterprise.

## **2 My Field Site: Epervár**

This thesis is the product of twelve months ethnographic research in the *Cigány* settlement (*cigánytelep*) of the village of Epervár. Epervár is an agricultural village with a population of 3210.<sup>6</sup> It is situated in Hajdú-Bihar county, close to the Romanian border in the east of Hungary. Estimates as to the size of the Epervár *Cigány* population vary. Diószegi estimated that 13% of the Epervár population is Romany (1994:48); the 2000 census, which relied on self-declaration, reported a Romany population of 2%; a local knowledgeable informant and good friend, Katalin, estimates 10%; while Pál, the Epervár

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<sup>6</sup> 1997 statistics from website (source withheld for confidentiality).

minority self government President, places the figure as high as 20%.<sup>7</sup> A list of characters and their relationships (a kinship diagram) is included as an appendix. Speaking only Hungarian, the local Romany population of this village is an example of a *Romungro* community. In the following section, I hope to 'humanize' the figures and statistics published by sociologists, by introducing this community and commenting on its experiences in regard to health, education and unemployment.

In choosing my field site, I worked with two essential criteria: the habitation had to be home to *Romungro* and be the site of a Dignity Foundation micro-enterprise project. These criteria were crucial as my research aims were to provide an ethnographic account of a *Romungro* community, and to investigate the effects of a community development scheme (the Dignity Foundation micro-enterprise project) on the community members. Epervár fulfilled both these research requirements and appealed for other, personal reasons.

On my initial trip to Epervár, I gained a distinct impression of the main settlement's Romany community. I had spent the past months visiting settlements either alone or with Dignity Foundation monitors, who were either making initial feasibility studies or mid-project assessments.<sup>8</sup> The good bus network and its proximity to a major town were two practical reasons for my liking the village, but its main appeal lay in the settlement's atmosphere: one that was tangibly lively and hospitable. The settlement, an area of exclusively Romany households, formed one corner of the village. The visual aspect of this area was different to the main body of the village, and the atmosphere was unmistakably that of a Romany settlement: voices, music, children playing in groups outdoors, adults talking as they rest or work, languid dogs and skinny cats, brightly painted, flimsy houses: features that many *Cigány* settlements share.

Walking up to the settlement, along a dirt track on which non-Romany households interspersed with Romany households until it ran into the exclusively *Cigány* area,

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<sup>7</sup> The 1993 Hungarian Act LXXVII on the rights of National and Ethnic Minorities identified Roma as being one of thirteen minorities in Hungary. The Act gave rise to the establishment of local minority self-governments. For information on and different perspectives on the effectiveness of these local bodies refer to Walsh (2000), Koulis (2001), Kováts (1998), Cahn (2001) and Schafft and Brown (2000).

<sup>8</sup> Chapter Five details the philosophy and programmes of the Dignity Foundation and explains the concept and role of Dignity Foundation monitors.



I commented on the pleasant, appealing atmosphere of this area, to which the monitor scoffed, dismissing it as “boring”. He told me that I should see other villages, reminiscing about drunken brawls in village pubs. The lack of hopeless drunks sitting out on the road, nursing empty lives and bad moods until an opportunity arose for a fight, summed this place up as “boring” for the monitor. For a real *Cigány* experience, it was the monitor’s belief that I should find one of these settlements and integrate myself into that particular strain of poverty and bleakness. While this was an informal comment, told with a degree of humour and teasing, it is perhaps instructive of some of the problems associated with the Dignity Foundation, as I shall explore in the penultimate chapter.

However, what was “boring” for the monitor was invigorating for me: young ladies were not offering their services as prostitutes along the main road, and houses were not constructed from crumbling mud bricks and waste. In Epervár, I was greeted by music blasting from stereos, children playing in the streets with a discarded plastic crate being used as a sleigh, an old man playing his trumpet and hangover sufferers from the *Cigány* Ball the night before. Here were signs of life and innovation, and I was immediately attracted to this Romany settlement. Over my twelve months of fieldwork, I learnt that Epervár is indeed a rather special place as a relatively prosperous centre of economy and employment. Among the Romany population there are several members of the community who act as employment providers to mainly Romany workers. And those not employing such large numbers are equally embedded in local business activities. These people combine working for *Cigány* employment providers as day labourers on a casual basis with their own business ventures, working either alone (rarely) or in teams. As we shall explore in future chapters the invisible economy is flourishing in Epervár.

It is not just the relative economic prosperity of Epervár that is notable. There is evidence that relations between non-Roma and *Cigánys* are less hostile and exclusionary than in other settlements in this region. Nearby Hajdúhadház had been in the news on several occasions for the fact that the end of year school celebrations had been held twice, once for Roma and once for other Hungarian citizens. Subsequently it had emerged that Romany children in this town’s schools were even fed separately and had to use separate toilets (see Bernáth and Mohács,

2000 and European Roma Rights Center, 1999c). In contrast, the local Epervár primary school is mixed. Classes are streamed according to ability, but Romany pupils attend the top classes along with their non-Romany classmates. This mixed school is a feature of the village that the Roma are very proud of, and they believe that it is the reason why everyone in the village gets on so well together (Roma and non-Roma).<sup>9</sup> In fact, there are many cracks and underlying tensions in regard to the school. Judging from my young friends' stories and situations, the dropout rate among the Romany pupils is high. Lívi left at twelve, Maria at thirteen to have a baby and several of the boys repeated years before dropping out completely. Seven-year-old Dani was repeating his first year, seemingly already determined for a short-lived school career. The Romany music teacher, a respected lady who lived in the settlement, spoke of the problem of pupils being taken from school by their parents to work. She also talked of what she termed the "biological fact" that Romany girls reach puberty more quickly than their non-Romany classmates, thus reaching child-bearing age earlier.<sup>10</sup> "The *Cigánys* do not like to work at school – they are boisterous and disruptive," explained Maria. The *Magyar* veterinary doctor's son supported this, referring to the Romany boys as class-clowns. For the *Cigány* boys, formal education is not important; a driving licence is the priority.

Romany parents too find reason to complain from their side of the problem. One mother complained that her daughter received worse treatment because she was *Cigány*. Another mother said that teachers control their behaviour in this respect because they know that if they discriminate, the parents of the children will complain, and the teachers will be punished. In regard to this idea of unspoken prejudice it is enlightening to consider the comment made by the local *Magyar* shopkeeper that the intellectual level of the *Cigány* children has dropped since the influx of new families since 1989. This impression of new families arriving in the settlement may have arisen from the movement of families who had lived in Budapest returning to the village after the system change. However, this influx was only ever mentioned by non-Roma and all local Romany families that I knew had well-established roots in the village, therefore there is a somewhat mythical

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<sup>9</sup> "A system of racially-segregated education in Hungary effectively denies equal education to Roma", European Roma Rights Center, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Surprisingly, this spurious viewpoint was supported by one of my most liberal-minded Budapest friends who visited me in the field.



aspect to this claim. For this reason, many Epervár *Magyar* parents now send their children to schools in neighbouring towns where there is not such a 'problem'. This trend of parents in rural locations sending their children to neighbouring schools to avoid their children attending the local school with its significant Romany intake is becoming more and more common (see Havas, 2002:93-100). This "white flight" leads to the "Gypsification of schools" (Helsinki Watch, 1996:67), and in this way another vicious circle is set in motion. It may be that I was witnessing the beginning of such a process in Epervár but the span of fieldwork makes this impossible to determine for certain.

### **3 Methodology**

As this introduction has begun to make clear, the Roma of Epervár, like their counterparts elsewhere in the country, lie on the margins of Hungarian life. As a group that has been systematically maltreated by a series of governments and continues to be institutionally discriminated against, it is not surprising that Roma are hostile to wider society and bureaucracies.

#### **Participant Observation**

Participant observation, "the foundation of cultural anthropology" (Bernard, 1994:136), was the main research technique that I employed. In the conduct of scientific research about cultural groups, participant observation allows one to: collect a different kind of data, more intimate information; reduces the problem of reactivity; helps the researcher formulate pertinent questions; gives the researcher an intuitive understanding of the culture; and is the best way of accessing certain research problems (Bernard, 1994:140-143). In terms of my research, one of the key factors in choosing participant observation as a research method was the factor that it allows you access to sensitive subject areas within sensitive groups, such as lending and business in a marginalized Romany community.

The distinction between that of participating observer and observing participant that Bernard draws to our attention is a subtle, but important one (1994:138). While, as Bernard writes, most anthropological research is based on the first role, in the field, I frequently found that I was an observing participant.

This style of research has its drawbacks in so far as it is more difficult to analyze the situation and maintain an objective stance (see Bernard, 1994:152-154) when you find yourself actively involved in the everyday lives and major events of the people that you are researching. On a more positive note, as observing participant the researcher is perhaps better placed to access intimate information. While 'going native' is not the goal of anthropology, as I explain below, access to a relatively closed society is made easier by being accepted by the community through building trust. I therefore felt that the method of observing participant, which was, to an extent, a response to the reaction of the community to my research, was the most effective way that I could carry out my work. For me, this building of trust and my immersion in the life of the community (Emerson, 2001:126-127) was both problematic and revealing. Within the community there was a general lack of trust and a manipulation of relationships (something I explore in more detail below and later in the thesis) which resulted in a constant challenge to disassociate personal feelings from social analysis - to maintain a degree of objectivity. Trips to Budapest, writing notes in a secluded cafe in a near-by town and a couple of visits home to the UK were methods that I employed to maintain, or to recall, objectivity.

Another drawback to participant observation is its reliance on the language ability of the researcher. A lack of language ability has been said to expose the researcher to being easily fooled by informants, while fluency in the local language increases the researcher's rapport with the community (Bernard, 1994:145). When I arrived in the field, my knowledge of Hungarian was minimal: conversations relied on gestures and facial expressions. Slowly, I began to learn the language so that by the end of my time in the field I was competent in the everyday speech of the community, but could easily be excluded by fast talking - deliberate or otherwise. Learning the language in this way had three positive elements: my learning of the language was interpreted as a sign of respect for by the people I lived with; I learnt the meaning and importance of words from a local perspective (see later discussions on '*testvér*'); and, although this also has a slightly negative aspect to it, I was seen to be someone quite harmless as I my understanding was necessarily limited.

How to introduce your research to the community is one issue that anthropologists who employ participant observation as a methodology debate. In line with the

feminist approach to fieldwork of conceptualizing and treating informants as friends (Wolf, 1996:12), I was honest in my intentions and attempted to create equal relations, as far as my unique position in the community allowed. Gender, ethnicity, age, personality, social and economic status all affected my relations with the people in the settlement (Emerson, 2001:128). Negotiating and managing relationships were constant aspects of my fieldwork, yet the nature of these negotiations revealed a great deal about community life. In the following section, I look in more detail at the nature of these personal relationships.

### Building Relations

By building trust<sup>11</sup> with my informants, I was then better positioned to ask questions (Bourgois, 1995:12-13).<sup>12</sup> The merits of this strategy were made clear when, nearing the end of my fieldwork, I approached a group of people in the yard of a house in a small settlement, some distance from the main Epervár *Cigány* settlement where I had spent the past months. Assuming that these people would know who I was, I was taken aback by their hostile and agitated response to my questioning about their relatives. It was not until I had explained that I was a foreign researcher with friends in the main *Cigány* settlement that I was welcomed into their home.

I lived in the settlement and took part in the daily lives of the people I befriended. While the daily routine of the Epervár *Cigány* settlement inhabitants is not detailed in this thesis, this immersion in daily life was my main strategy for gaining information (see Carsten, 1997:5-9 and 256-280). I rented my own house, but to all intent and purposes I lived with my neighbours, László and Melinda.<sup>13</sup> As a female I was fortunate that, unlike Horváth (forthcoming) who was unable to accompany men to their workplaces, I was given access to the worlds of both

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<sup>11</sup> Refer to later chapters for an examination of the problematic nature of 'trust'.

<sup>12</sup> I found MacLeod's (1995) and Whyte's (1943) accounts of their fieldwork experiences particularly informative in addressing the complexities of fieldwork in such communities. Mends argues that such caution in working as a social science researcher with Roma is unfounded as "Gypsies are as willing to share their opinions and feelings with an interviewer for the sake of knowledge as any other group in society" (1997:161). I would argue that Mends found little resistance to his questionnaire as it was simplistic (agreeing with Okely, 1997:198) and touched on neither delicate nor contentious subject matter, as shown by the 93.64% belief in the existence of some kind of spiritual being or power (Mends, 1997:159). I suggest that had Mends researched a more ambiguous area of life in a more in-depth manner he may not have been greeted with such a cooperative response.

<sup>13</sup> I gave László and Melinda money for the food that they bought and cooked for me.



males and females.<sup>14</sup> The Epervár men found it novel and flattering that I was interested in their income-generating strategies, while the females were happy to let me unobtrusively accompany them on their daily tasks.

In terms of positioning myself in the settlement social structure, I was extremely fortunate to have met a respected, kind and intelligent Romany man on an early investigative visit to the village. With a Hungarian Romany friend as my companion on this visit, my reasons for wanting to live in the settlement were enthusiastically received by this man, László. László later became not only one of my main informants, but he welcomed me into his household as my protector and friend. Indeed, he confided in his sister that to him I had become like a “daughter” (*kislány*). Without his continual support, this research would not have been possible, so to him I extend my deepest gratitude.

I relied heavily on László and Katalin, head of another household, as my two main informants with whom I established close relationships. As this thesis explores, relations in the community were to a large extent defined by family connections and so I was somewhat restricted in only being able to build relations with these two informants and their immediate families. However, in doing so, I was placed in a unique position of having intimate access to these two family groups.

Additionally, both of my main informants were rather atypical in the community. Katalin was a female head of household and successful entrepreneur, who participated in the Roma Parliament and who was able 'to pass' after being raised by non-Roma in an orphanage. László's disabled status meant that he was restricted in his activities and his wife, Melinda, was forced to take on a much more pro-active role than other women in the settlement. She worked hard to fulfil her obligations as wife and mother, as well as providing full-time care to László and representing the family group outdoors as László was often restricted to remaining indoors. Through these two atypical family groups I was able to gain insight into life in the settlement.

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<sup>14</sup> This access was limited. For example, I was never invited to go to the pub, or to go gambling with men.

Even once I had become an established member of the community, immersed in its everyday life, I was still restricted in my methods of research. For example, after several months in the field I attempted to use a dictaphone to record interviews. László, hearing of my intention to record people, warned me that I would have to act like a spy and discreetly hide the dictaphone under an outer-layer of clothing as otherwise no one would talk to me. He was correct in his prediction of people's reactions, so I rarely used the machine. On one of the occasions that I did use the dictaphone with Katalin, who not only accepted, but actually enjoyed the experience, it was telling that once the recording device had been switched off she visibly relaxed and then continued talking, but more animatedly and personally: "Now this is what you wanted to hear, isn't it?" Katalin was well aware of what my research implied, and knew that I was recording the details of everyday life in the settlement in a diary, however this episode illustrates the obtrusive nature of the recording device as opposed to note-taking, which Katalin happily let me do in her presence. Some people however, did feel uncomfortable when I wrote notes in their presence: "Why does she need this?" a close contact aggressively asked. While people knew that I was interested in learning about their lives in order to write a thesis on life in the settlement, with particular attention to income-generating activities, some people disliked the obvious recording of material. Instead the method that was most suitable was informal, unstructured conversations which I recorded once home in the evening.

There were, however, a few people who seemed to enjoy knowing that I was taking such a keen interest in their lives and encouraged me to document my observations. László presented me with his grandfather's old leather pencil case, saying that it would be more use to me with my note-taking. To him, my notebooks were precious: even when we had no kindling with which to light a fire in the winter and were searching around for scrap paper, he always refused to use my blank notebooks. After a month in the field, putting me under enormous pressure to answer appropriately, he asked me, "So what have you learnt about us *Cigánys*?" Other close friends would urge me to, "Go home and write down what we just told you." It was a combination of the unobtrusive nature of participant observation as a research technique, and the support of the community I was studying that enabled me to carry out my research.



I was always honest and open about my research, fully explaining why I was in the village and showing people my notes to support the explanation. While, as I mention later, I assumed that the explanation of my presence in the settlement would spread, this was not always the case and I sometimes found myself refuting rumours or explaining once again what I was doing there. Often the idea that I was there to find a husband was more appealing an explanation and I was encouraged to pursue both my research and my future family life with equal vigour. Katalin's family, for instance, chided that I was too serious for such a young person and should find a boyfriend while doing my research, if not, what stories would I have to tell my grandchildren?

My informants' awareness of my research and its implications was demonstrated on several occasions. For example, I was expressly told not to take a photograph of one man who felt that by working the cane and collecting social benefit he was acting illegally, on another occasion I was told not to tell anyone about a certain activity that I partook in, and at other times I did not record information that I felt could be used to harm those involved. At a funeral, in contrast, I was urged by László, after he had sought permission from the deceased's brother, to take photographs. On this occasion, I chose not to as I felt too uncomfortable doing so, but again, this illustrates that my main informants were both informed, and appreciative, of my research.

I was strongly encouraged to assimilate into the local community during my stay. This was expressed in various ways: "Let me cut your dress so that it is nice and short", laughed a friend brandishing a pair of scissors; "Of course she knows about caning,<sup>15</sup> she came with us!" proudly exclaimed a male friend to a visitor; "You hold the hoe like a *Cigány*, not a *Magyar*", I was complimented; and "You stuff that cabbage like a *Cigány* woman (*asszony*)", marvelled a friend. As Okely remarks in regard to her own fieldwork experiences (1983:43), my assimilation into the community was interpreted as a show of respect. However, this appraisal of my main method of data collection fails to address the organic and volatile nature of my position in the social structure of the community. Over the course of my fieldwork, I never totally lost my novel status in the community. As this thesis

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<sup>15</sup> Caning is one of the annual economic activities of the region. It involves cutting and bundling cane for sale abroad. Caning is discussed in detail in Chapter Four, Section 2.4.1

progresses, the reader shall hopefully understand the comment that during my fieldwork I found myself engaged in a game, the rules of which I did not fully understand, but it was from this position that I was able to gain insight into the social structures and values of the Epervár Romany community. All members of the community were expected to respect the rules of behaviour governing social interactions and I, as a pseudo-member of one family branch, was expected to do the same, and yet the rules never became clear to me despite my best efforts to foresee the appropriate reactions and responses.

In gathering the data from the Budapest-based NGO, the Dignity Foundation, I was fortunate that the director of the NGO was extremely encouraging and supportive of my research. I had built a relationship with the organization as a freelance researcher in the late-90's and, as this thesis grew from that initial research, I was able to comfortably build on that relationship. The organization was in a process of review and therefore my research could be incorporated into this process. Throughout my research I kept in contact with the NGO, and verbally raised a couple of issues concerning what I had experienced in the field. Many of my observations independently substantiated conclusions that the NGO was drawing concerning the pallet factory project that they were supporting, perhaps an explanation for the pallet factory leaders' reluctance to cooperate with me. The director of the NGO was keen that I recorded how projects that the NGO funds are realized on the ground. Researchers with similar aims to my own had attempted a neutral study earlier but had become involved as advisors in the NGO-funded projects, and the director was eager that this did not happen again. I conducted my research in a settlement which was known to have problems in terms of paying back loans (in light of this the NGO had decided not to support anymore cane project proposals from the village), therefore it was in the NGO's best interest to learn of possible explanations for these problems. The NGO is a professional, transparent organization that wants to work productively with local Romany communities. This thesis could therefore form one part of the NGO's review process, which will eventually result in the NGO adapting and evolving to become a more effective organization. With this in mind, the monitors were happy for me to accompany them on their visits, I was given unlimited access to the Dignity Foundation paperwork and was able to repeatedly interview monitors and the director. Without such a supportive and open attitude from the NGO I would



not have been unable to produce this thesis. Access to the world of the Dignity Foundation was as crucial as acceptance by the Romany community. To this end, I would like to express my gratitude and respect for the Dignity Foundation director and staff.

My research involved careful consideration of ethical issues. I was guided by the American Anthropological Association Statement on Ethics (1971, amended 1986) and therefore protecting my informants was of paramount importance. I have therefore changed the names of everyone and the village of Epervár is a fictitious place, although as Berreman acknowledges (1972, cited in Barnes, 1979:137) pseudonyms are for privacy rather than concealment as informed individuals who really want to can track down such a disguised place. Many of the local income-generation strategies that I have detailed here fall into the illegal second economy. However, concepts of what is illegal and what is not vary in the community: the factory owner happily let me photograph the 'illegal' employees once they were dressed in official sanitary gear; the local policeman went hamstering; it was perceived that working the cane land while collecting state aid was illegal, while the act of working the cane with no official record of doing so, was not. One informant did allude to the dangerous aspect of such illegal work, but there was little attention paid to this aspect of these everyday income-generating activities. I was not in the village to police, neither was I trying to discredit the NGO, rather I worked to provide information that would be of long-term benefit to the situation of the Roma. Again and again, non-Romany Hungarians have expressed an interest in my research, are surprised when I talk about daily life in the settlement and ask for a copy of this thesis. If my research manages to encourage people to reconsider their negative opinions of Roma then it is achieved something of benefit.

#### **4 Summary of the Thesis**

##### **Chapter One**

The first chapter overviews the most recent political and social upheaval to have affected the Hungarian Romany population (the collapse of state socialism and the introduction of free market capitalism) and describes their current situation. Using

primary archival material, secondary sources, and local informants' testimonies, I examine, in turn, different aspects of communist policy that were designed to advance the position of, and assimilate, the Roma into mainstream Hungarian society. The data from this period provides an insight into the change in living conditions of this sector of the populace, and so provides the fabric for appreciating the present preoccupations of the Roma. The 'transformation' that has taken place since 1989, has had important implications for the Roma. The withdrawal of the state has created a vacuum in terms of welfare protection, and it is this space that the Hungarian civil sector is trying to effectively fill. Using anecdotes and data from my field site, the village of Epervár, I begin to 'humanize' the statistical evidence of increasing marginalization since the change in regime and comment on how ethnic affiliation has become more of a dividing factor than it had been in the recent past: relations between minority and majority have become more politicised, and post-communist state policy has contributed to the blurring of ethnicity and poverty.

## Chapter Two

In the second chapter, I present the foundations for understanding this community's motivations and values. This chapter therefore introduces the community and comments on how they relate to each other and to outsiders. I begin by unpacking the category *Cigány* as used and conceived by the group themselves. By visiting recurrent, key themes that are mobilized frequently as indicators of *Cigány* identity, I shed light on the ambiguity and ambivalence surrounding this category as a marker of identification. I comment on the *Cigánys* view of themselves as linked to mainstream *Magyars* views, and how these ethnic divisions have become more pronounced since 1989. However, I conclude that an important distinction between the Epervár Roma and other studied Romany groups is that they articulate little sense of moral superiority over the *Magyars*.

## Chapter Three

In the third chapter, I focus on the local idiom of relatedness and explore how this informs patterns of work, crisis situations and personal relations. The community places great emphasis on allegiance to 'family' in both a narrow (*család*) and extended (*testvér*) sense and it is these allegiances that, as we shall see in the



penultimate chapter, has ramifications for the NGO's projects.<sup>16</sup> While at one level the community presents itself as a bounded entity (see previous chapter), there are many layers of nuanced interactions. Whom people greet, work with and visit is determined by allegiance to extended family (*testvér*) values. These obligations infiltrate and shape virtually all aspects of community life (a notable exception being the lending and dealing transactions that take place between non-*testvér*). In this chapter, I explore the moral, legitimating aspect of relatedness, its fluid construction, and how it is interlinked with the expectation of people 'cheating' each other.

#### Chapter Four

I use the evidence presented in this chapter to demonstrate that there is a range of local Romany economic activities that rely on specific strategies and skills. Understanding the position of successful economic activities vis-à-vis local values, is crucial if the NGO hopes to engage with the local community to make an effective impact. While I propose that the underclass theory is over-pessimistic, I support the claim that, for most, there are barriers to Romany entrepreneurship. Referring to the experiences of Epervár Roma, I demonstrate that Romany ethnicity seems to be an obstacle in business success. As evidence, I give an overview of the nature of work in Epervár before focusing on the methods employed by local entrepreneurs to secure and maintain their position. Such a position means both interacting appropriately with employees and fellow workers, as well as maintaining good relations with the *Magyar* land/factory owners.

#### Chapter Five

In the penultimate chapter, I detail the strategies and philosophy of the NGO and one of its development schemes and then, by drawing on case studies, extrapolate the key contradictions and cleavages between the community and the NGO which form around issues of trust, the contract and the values of *testvér* (extended family). This chapter demonstrates the practical outcomes of a lack of mutual understanding between NGO and Roma in one village. At this stage, appreciating the ability of these Roma to act as successful entrepreneurs, is an important context for interpreting the NGO's experiences and brings in to sharp focus the

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<sup>16</sup> Throughout the thesis I translate *család* as close family/family (I use these terms interchangeably), and *testvér* as extended family, with a sub-category of close extended family (close *testvér*).



misunderstandings that exist between the NGO and the project participants. The explanations for the cleavages in values are applicable at the broader level of NGO involvement in Romany communities.

### Conclusion

The conclusion re-examines the issue of the terms in which the Dignity Foundation and local Roma interact. This thesis does not comment on the different views held by different actors within the civil sector (beneficiaries, donors, civil sector workers), but rather focuses on the assumptions of one NGO in regard to the values of the people with which it works. In doing so, I comment on a general trend towards work with the Romany population where preconceived ideas and perceptions, whether they be forced cultural assimilation or attempts at fostering mutual trust, result in a general lack of mutual dialogue. I conclude with a modest proposal as to a possible way forward for organisations like the Dignity Foundation.

## Chapter One

### Roma<sup>17</sup> in Hungary

#### 1 Introduction

In Hungary, there is a correlation between being poor and being Romany: being Romany increases the probability of long-term poverty by 13% (Ringold, 2002:4). In 1993, registered unemployment was 49.68% among the Hungarian Roma, while only 12.84% among the non-Romany population (Kemény, 2002:70). How this poverty is perceived and tackled has important implications for the status of Roma. It is indisputable that the Roma form one of the two poorest strata of Hungarian society<sup>18</sup> and face discrimination at every stage of their lives. This discrimination affects both those Roma who have ostentatiously held on to their distinctive culture and way of life, e.g. Vlach Roma (c.f. Stewart, 1997), and also the majority of Roma (about 75%) who speak only Hungarian and have, over the past 150 years, tried to integrate and assimilate into mainstream Hungarian society. Those who “have turned Hungarian, or non-Gypsy” (Szuhay, 1995:114) are controversially labelled *Romungro*, appearing to mean “Hungarian man” (Helsinki Watch, 1996:8). Literally translated, the Romani word *Romungro* means Rom-Hungarian, a value-laden term referring to the groups’ ambiguous status as viewed by other Roma and non-Roma Hungarians. It is specifically this group of ‘assimilated’ Roma, their culture and economic strategies, that this thesis explores. Contrary to wide-spread assumptions that view *Romungro* as partially assimilated people eager to lose their *Cigány* label, in this thesis I illustrate the complexity of the situation and draw upon the fact that hybridity and adaptation need not necessarily lead to a loss of identity. This thesis demonstrates the validity of the assertion that, “though 70%<sup>19</sup> of Hungarian Gypsies have been linguistically assimilated, their Gypsy consciousness is at least as strong as that of the Vlach Gypsies who speak Romany” (Vajda, 2002: 153), and shows why this is the case.

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<sup>17</sup> Throughout the thesis, I shall use the terms Roma/Romany and *Cigány* to refer to Romany people and non-Roma and *Magyar* to non-Roma people interchangeably. A full explanation for this decision is provided in Chapter Two.

<sup>18</sup> The other impoverished group is the elderly.

<sup>19</sup> The figures of exactly how many Roma speak only Hungarian vary, but estimates are generally at 70-75% of the Romany population. 15 to 20% are estimated to be Lovari-speaking Vlach Roma, and 10% Beash, speaking an archaic form of Romanian. (Refer to the Hungarian Prime Minister’s Office Press and Media website.)



One of the frameworks within which to appreciate *Romungro* culture is to understand the group's position as an ethnic minority marginalized by the recently introduced free market economy (post-1989). A second context in which to understand the status of Roma in Hungary today is to appreciate the change in policy that has repositioned the Romany minority in the political landscape. This policy shift is interlinked with the new moral attitude surrounding the supposed growth of a Romany underclass and the assumption of the 'helplessly' poor. The Hungarian state now works with the narrowest definition of need, material deprivation, that fails to acknowledge multiple needs. For example, in 1985, flat-rate maternity-leave grants were replaced by grants linked to recipient's income in order to target 'the needy', as it was claimed that the old flat-rate maternity-leave grant had been rewarding "the undeserving and deserving equally" (Haney, 2002:188, citing Beke, 1982). This, as Haney notes, had a discriminatory undercurrent as generally Romany women use the maternity-leave grant for longer periods and have a less substantial income. The category *Cigány* and the group's relationship to majority society have recently undergone a process of transformation as the political agenda concerning the Romany minority has changed. The state socialist policy of "the *forced assimilation* of the Romany community, framed *in terms of social policy*" (Szalai, 2003, in the original) has been replaced by the calculated withdrawal of the state from the field of welfare, and the instigation of a new dialogue encouraging and celebrating ethnic differences. One aspect of this change in government policy is the growth of the Hungarian civil sector as it steps into the welfare vacuum created by the state's withdrawal. This thesis does not attempt to analyze the civil sector and civil society in general, but rather presents the current political climate as one context in which to appreciate the chasms between the philosophy of Budapest-based NGOs and the values and strategies of the Roma. Once the stage had been set for the establishment of alternative welfare institutions, liberal-minded, ideologically-driven individuals manoeuvred themselves into the civil sector, envisaging that this was a forum in which they could make a substantial impact. The Dignity Foundation was founded partly in reaction to the state socialist policy of forced assimilation. Its ideological foundations emphasize building civil society, and it does so through a variety of community development programmes which emphasise 'bottom-up' participation in contrast to state control from above. This sector is viewed by actors within it as a positive, bridge-building influence



between the state and the domestic sphere. Whether the bottom up approach of this NGO has managed to circumvent the general lack of mutual dialogue that Szalai identified in the state socialist period is a question that this thesis raises.

### Culture of Poverty and the Underclass

In post-socialist Hungary it is not just the emergence of mass unemployment and poverty that is novel. A new *discourse* concerning poverty has also arisen that has implications for the impoverished Romany minority. Following decades of policy directed towards assimilating this sector of the population, the Roma are now 'managing' in a political climate that is struggling to re-frame the understanding of the causes of poverty and therefore how best to tackle it.<sup>20</sup> Poverty was denied and hidden under state socialism, but with the introduction of a liberal democracy and free market capitalism and with an accompanying increase in both absolute and relative poverty (Emigh, Fodor and Szelényi, 2001), poverty has been reconfigured at the political level. Szalai (2002) has considered the different consequences of the previous regime's policy on the conceptualizing and practical response to poverty in Hungary today. Her premise for such an examination is that the "conceptualisation, measurement and the actions" taken for the alleviation of poverty are "determined by the political culture of a given society" (Szalai, 1998). One outcome that she identifies in the Hungarian case is that current policy, with the reduction of public expenditure to those 'who really need it', suggests that poverty is "'accidental' and individualized, and that the victims can be blamed" (Szalai, 2002). This attitude is similar to the concept of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor and has ramifications for the Hungarian Roma.

This conceptualizing of marginalized people as responsible for their own situation is part of a wider debate that has its recent roots in North American discussions of the link between social reform and social exclusion. The notion of the undeserving poor stems from the inter-related concept of the underclass and the theory of the poverty of culture. Although concepts with a resemblance to that of underclass go back as far as the middle ages, and take a modern shape by the time of eighteenth century organized charity (Geremek, 1994:25-36), the notion of underclass now found in the United States has its own distinctive shape. Myrdal (1964) used the

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<sup>20</sup> Poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon that includes such factors as the psychological pain of being poor and a sense of powerlessness with respect to the institutions of the state and society, as well as a limited resources (Ringold, 2002:2).

term “underclass” to classify those people who were excluded from the increasing affluence of post-war capitalist societies. This group of people formed the bottom stratum of these societies’ socio-economic hierarchies and were finding themselves increasingly separated from the mainstream. According to Myrdal, this underclass resulted from changing economic structures. Urban black ghettos of the United States were referred to as a prime example of this emerging underclass.

The theory of underclass was developed and complemented by Lewis (1966) who suggested that a “culture of poverty” was emerging in certain developing countries. The behavioural traits that he identified as forming the culture of poverty were the survival strategies of the poor, including violence to settle quarrels, male desertion, matrifocal families and alcoholism. It is claimed that the poor are locked in a cycle of poverty beyond their control, with a limited range of survival strategies at their disposal. As opposed to Myrdal’s economic explanation, this concept of the culture of poverty was said to arise from societal transition and the breakdown of social order (Kligman, Ladányi and Szelényi, 2002), and resulted in poor people’s choices being governed by limited options within a cultural framework (Olomoofe, 2002:2).

Since the formulation of these theories, debates have surrounded their applicability, with certain schools of thought drawing on particular interpretations to support their views. For example, as Kligman, Ladányi and Szelényi (2002) write, both underclass and culture of poverty theories gave the impression that the underclass resulted from the culture of poverty itself. And since race became one of its defining features, the underclass, the ‘victims’ of poverty, could plausibly be blamed for their situation. In this form these ideas were seized upon by the neo-conservatives to attack the welfare state (Kligman, Ladányi and Szelényi, 2002). The interweaving of what is perceived to be a lack of morality and cultural deprivation in explaining a group’s marginalized status has been used to rationalize the position of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe (Pinnock, 1999:63; Kligman, Szelényi and Ladányi, 2002). The concept of the culture of poverty has been adopted in Central and Southern Europe to focus on race and gender as the central components of poverty. “If the racialization and feminization of poverty is successful, the cleavage between the poor and the not-so-poor becomes rigid and social actors perceive the cleavage as natural” (Emigh, Fodor



and Szelényi 2001). While the culture of poverty theory has attracted support and used to confirm such notions as the ‘unworthy’ poor, it has been heavily criticized for failing to note the role of history, culture and political-economic structures (Bourgois, 1995:16). Ethnographic material, such as Hannerz’s (1969) and MacLeod’s (1995) study of low-income USA populations and Willis’ (1977) study of English “lad” culture, has been used to support a more textured and theoretically more complex analysis of the situation.<sup>21</sup> Hannerz (1969) emphasizes the range of possible responses to social and economic marginalization, and points out that poor residents of ghettos do share mainstream values. MacLeod (1995) and Willis (1977) emphasize the structural inequality of class society. In each case, these disadvantaged communities are contesting and resisting the socio-economic pressures bearing down on them and produce alternative cultural forms in response. Drawing from Bourdieu (1977), such cultural production theorists believe that “[t]hrough cultural practices of opposition, individuals shape the oppression that larger forces impose upon them” (Bourgois, 1995:17).

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis, this trend towards interconnecting morality, culture and poverty is evident not only in post-communist countries, but in other parts of Europe too. In Spain, for example, the idea of the undeserving poor is gaining ground in the public conscious in regard to the marginalized Spanish Romany, the *Gitanos*. The community of *Gitanos* that Gay Y Blasco’s (1999a) ethnography centres on was deliberately chosen for the reason that the *Gitanos* of that settlement were not involved in drug dealing and drug addiction, ‘*la droga*’. *La Droga* characterizes current *Payo* (non-Romany Spanish) representations of the *Gitanos*, and through these stereotypes that associate the *Gitanos* with *la droga*, prejudiced Spaniards are now able to vocalize their discriminatory attitudes in terms of morality, rather than racism. The discourse about *Gitanos* has become one of social deviation, with the *Gitanos* being viewed not just as poor people, but as amoral, poor people trying to make money through the selling of drugs. The barriers between ‘poor’ and ‘offender’ are collapsed, thereby legitimizing the discrimination directed towards the *Gitanos*.

While Kligman, Szelényi and Ladányi (2002) reject and criticize the behavioural sense of the term underclass and its racist interpretation, they claim that there is

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<sup>21</sup> Refer to Valentine (1968) for a critique of the notion of the culture of poverty.



evidence of a Romany underclass forming in post-socialist Hungary. Working from Wilson's (1978) assertion that it is wrong to make an equation between race and underclass as de-industrialisation affected the black population differently (with some black people benefiting from the new economic climate and moving out of the ghetto while others became trapped in the ghetto), the Hungarian Roma, according to Kligman, Szelényi and Ladányi (2002), are likewise being affected differently by the change in economic circumstances. There are Roma who have improved their socio-economic situation following the transition (see Hajnal, 2000; Lakatos, 2000), but at the same time, a large proportion of poor people, many who are Romany, are becoming increasingly marginalized. "'Underclass' then pertains to a certain class of Roma (and others) who are increasingly excluded in socio-economic and spatial terms" (Kligman, Szelényi and Ladányi, 2002:3). Durst (2002) and Fleck and Virág (1999) are among the researchers whose studies support the view that there is a Romany underclass forming in Hungary. Increasing poverty and the 'Gypsification' of areas are indicators of such a process. In this thesis, I would like to contribute to this discussion by introducing a rural *Romungro* community who are not slipping into extreme poverty and social exclusion, but neither are they particularly benefiting from the transition. Rather these Roma are social agents in the 'transformation', who are working positively within their boundaries (limited employment opportunities, ethnic discrimination, and limited resources) to improve their economic and social position at the local level. Within the community are examples of diverse responses to economic openings, which are skilfully manipulated by entrepreneurs who rely on contacts with non-Roma in a society in which Roma are becoming increasingly marginalized.

### Civil Sector

In response to the state's withdrawal from welfare issues, there has been a considerable growth in the number of Hungarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These have assumed responsibility for filling the gap left by the state in issues of welfare. The Hungarian civil sector has expanded rapidly, with the number of NGOs growing fivefold between 1989 and 1995 to more than 43,000 registered organizations (Ringold, Orenstein and Wilkens, 2003:94, citing



Jenkins, 1999).<sup>22</sup> In 2000, over 62,000 people were employed in the Hungarian non-profit sector, with more than 400,000 volunteers (Strategy Paper of the Government of Hungary, 2002).<sup>23</sup> NGOs in Hungary provide a diverse range of services and protect various interest groups with organizations engaged in the fields of environment, women's associations, youth and children, health, consumer protection and Roma rights. The Hungarian civil sector acquires a proportion of its funding from the Hungarian government: in 2000, 28.4% of total revenues of the non-profit sector was government allocations (Strategy paper of the Government of Hungary, 2002).<sup>24</sup> Another major source of funding is multilateral agencies (for example, the World Bank, UNESCO) and both Hungarian and overseas donors (Soros Foundation and the Ford Foundation respectively), many of which are interested in supporting projects that will enhance democracy in Hungary and strengthen civil society. Civil society is emphasised by these agencies as an important component in the development of democracy and has therefore become a "buzz word" in the development discourse of Central and Eastern Europe. Civil society is part of "project speak" (Sampson, 1998:4) alongside 'sustainability', 'mission statement', 'infrastructural development', etc. It is this preoccupation with civil society, and the role that NGOs have both in representing and encouraging civil society, that I turn briefly to now.

NGOs are the tangible outcome of this emphasis on 'civil society' in post-socialist states. This term was revived by Solidarity against the Polish party-state and then became a rallying cry for movements in other countries struggling against state socialism (Hall, 1995:1). The recent revival of the concept of civil society in opposition to totalitarian regimes is based in the idea of "the self-organization of society, the rebuilding of social ties outside the authoritarian state, and the appeal to an independent public sphere outside of all official, state or party-controlled communication" (Arato, 1999:226). Under state socialism, the state claimed to know what people's best interests were and set up institutions to provide for them, however the rhetoric of civil society claims that the state had failed to recognize

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<sup>22</sup> But as Pinnock (1999) points out, Hungary's civil sector is still weak in comparison to the UK's. Whereas in 1990, the UK had 350,000 NGOs, amounting to 0.3 NGOs for every person, in Hungary in 1991, there were only 0.06 NGOs per head.

<sup>23</sup> Although how much time these 400,000 volunteers devoted to their voluntary work is unclear.

<sup>24</sup> The Hungarian government is working on strategies to increase this figure to 40% in line with other European countries (Strategy paper of the Government of Hungary, 2002).



citizens' interests and that only a bottom-up approach would fully address the needs and desires of the citizens. Commentators question, however, the extent to which the 1989 pro-democracy movements were grass-root demonstrations stemming from the will of the people (Pine and Bridger, 1998; Hann, 1996; Hall, 1995) and, as this thesis shall demonstrate, the extent to which new, post-socialist forms of civic organization are addressing the concerns of citizens is also debatable.

Questioning the appropriateness of applying the term 'civil society' in post-socialist settings is part of a wider debate concerned with the vagueness and usefulness of the term. Civil society is not a term that can be applied uniformly, but rather it is interpreted and expressed differently in different situations. Interpretations of this fuzzy term (Hall, 1995:2) vary. Hann (1996) identifies two main strands in current interpretations of civil society (influenced by intellectual figures such as Marx, Hegel and Ferguson): one emphasizes class exploitation and the other, the one that is most prevalent in modern debates, is based on freely associating individuals. However, both interpretations identify civil society with "realms outside the power of the state" and assume "the universality of modern western notions of the person" (Hann, 1996:5). Anthropologists are, however, able to question and move away from such narrow and constricting definitions to comment on dynamic, local expressions of civil society. For example, Buchowski (1996) writes that new forms of autonomous civil society have emerged in post-socialist Poland (e.g. trade unions, political parties, NGOs), but that people also value the positive role of the state as "provider" (1996:93) and therefore a new "hybrid" (1996:94) form of civil society is in existence. It is argued that civil society existed in Hungary prior to the transition as there had been a tolerance of informal economic networks (Hann, 1995:167-170), and that this allowed the development of the civil sector that is in Hungary today (Arato, 1999).<sup>25</sup> The benefits of this new incarnation of civil society is questioned by Hann who believes that the state provided for its citizens under state socialism and that the withdrawal of the state from certain areas has produced negative results: "the re-emergence of Rotary clubs is little consolation when you no longer have secure employment" (1995:9). It is against this background that the ability of the Dignity

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<sup>25</sup> Although Hann (1995) argues that civil society, as interpreted as involvement in the 'public sphere', is as elusive for people living in rural Hungarian communities now as it was under state socialism.



Foundation to effectively address the needs and desires of the Romany minority is considered. The foundation is working to address the ‘failures’ of the socialist state by working with the Roma on the basis of equality and partnership, while others would argue that the state is needed to counterbalance the structural inequalities. In her critique of the Hungarian welfare system, Haney (2002) questions the “blind faith so often placed in civil society” (2002:235) as during the 1990’s civil society grew but Roma found themselves disenfranchised – one of the groups failing to utilize the new civic space. Like Hann, Haney calls for the state to guarantee all its citizens strong social rights.

The Dignity Foundation is an NGO that forged the way for the Hungarian civil sector by establishing itself in the unstable first stages of the new Hungarian liberal democracy. The foundation was created by someone with experiences of the civil sector in other regions of the world, and former dissidents who, under state socialism, worked for an illegal but tolerated Hungarian foundation (*SZETA*). The Dignity Foundation now supports and initiates a diverse range of Romany-targeted projects under the mission statement of contributing to “the emergence and support of civil society in Hungary” (Dignity Foundation brochure). For the purposes of this thesis, I focus on one particular branch of the foundation’s work: the foundation’s poverty and ethnicity programme. This programme provides “grants and loans to support self-help initiatives which enable Roma people and others to build economic and social autonomy” (Dignity Foundation brochure). This poverty and ethnicity programme uses loans as a tool to enable livelihood initiatives with the aim of making an impact on the economic and social conditions of the programme participants. In this way, the programme is loosely based on the micro-enterprise model of giving loans to poor people who are otherwise unable to access loans from formal lending institutions (a more detailed account of the foundation’s methods is included in the chapter five on the Dignity Foundation).

Despite the efforts of the Dignity Foundation to ensure that its Romany project participants are involved in every stage of the project cycle, the NGO, with its emphasis on inclusion and respect, suffers from one of the features identified by Pinnock (1999) that has restricted the effectiveness of Bulgarian NGOS since 1989. She writes that some NGOs over-emphasized strategies to include groups,



when “[a]t the heart of such strategies lay abstract concepts of ‘civil society’ and ‘democracy’, which all too easily resulted in a lack of consideration for the values of existing cultures” (1999:213). In this thesis, I shall extend this observation to a specific Hungarian case where a non-Romany led NGO is struggling to work effectively with project participants because of a cleavage in values between them.<sup>26</sup> While there may be limited evidence of civil society in Romany communities, Koulish (2001), writing about the role and effectiveness of local minority self-governments in fulfilling their goal of including Roma in democratic life, argues that while this population lacks the social capital that Putnam (1993) identifies as being indicators of strong civic attachments, Roma nonetheless have the civic knowledge and want to be involved in civil society. Whether the Dignity Foundation effectively encourages this is one question that this thesis addresses.

One of the features of Romany community life, that has implications for the micro-enterprise scheme, is the lack of trust between non-kin. A lack of trust is a feature of post-communist societies, and is especially pertinent in the case of the Roma who have been persecuted by mainstream society for centuries. As Koulish writes, stories about mishandling of funds and secret alliances between the minority self-government and the police, whether true or not, reveal a lack of trust and respect, “two qualities required if effective civic attachments are to be forged” (2001:32). For the Roma that this thesis deals with, trust is strongest between kin, and it is these allegiances that form the basis of nearly all social interactions. It is such networks that Putnam identifies as barriers to achieving a functioning civil society. However, I propose that, in line with Sampson (1998), alternative methods of engaging with the Roma should be designed that embrace these networks, rather than try to overcome them.

### Roma in Hungary Today

The size of the Romany population in Hungary is contested. Romany groups and NGOs estimate that at least 5% of the Hungarian population is Romany, that is 500,000 people, and some estimates put this figure as high as 800,000 (European Roma Rights Center, 1999a). However, census results, based on self-

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<sup>26</sup> Marushiakova and Popov (referenced in Pinnock, 1999) argue that non-Romany led NGOs who work on behalf of Roma have very little, if any, in-depth or first hand knowledge of Romany life. In regard to the Dignity Foundation, the director has worked directly, in different capacities, with Roma.



identification, are notoriously low in comparison to these estimates. The 2001 Hungarian census registered there being only 190,046 Roma.<sup>27</sup> In my field site, the village of Epervár, the minority self-government President estimates that 20% of the population are *Cigánys*, while only 2% claimed that to be so in the latest census.<sup>28</sup> Coupled with the stipulations of the 1992 Data Protection Law, concrete data concerning ethnicity is hard to obtain.<sup>29</sup> The reasons why Roma disclaim their ethnicity to census collectors' questioning is not difficult to understand when one considers the historical tragedies that have befallen this ethnic group and the stigma, prejudice and marginalization that they continue to be subjected to.

Discrimination against Roma is discernible in every sphere of life, from education to justice to employment. The statistical overview below will shed light on the restrictive and discriminatory environment that Hungarian Roma are forced to negotiate their lives in.

The general state of health among Roma is extremely poor. The life expectancy of Roma is ten years lower than that of non-Roma, and infant mortality is higher among the Romany population.<sup>30</sup> Infectious diseases, digestive system disorders and perinatal mortality are distinctly more common amongst Roma than the population at large (Kállai and Törzsök, 2000). An inadequate access to health services and information only partially explain the appalling health situation of the Roma: sociological factors (living conditions, diet and lifestyle) are also responsible for the disparity in the health of Hungarian Roma and non-Roma.

While evidence presented in this thesis and elsewhere (UNDP, 2002; Horváth, forthcoming; Kemény, 2002) suggests that the level of employment among the Romany population is not as low as the official statistics portray, Roma still find themselves under-represented in the Hungarian workplace. Official unemployment amongst Roma at the end of 1993 was 49.68%, compared to

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.nepszamlalas2001.hu>

<sup>28</sup> This conflict of data can be seen in the late 1800's too. A *Cigány* census of 1873 found there to be 214,000 Roma and 275,000 in 1893, while the official censuses of 1880 and 1890 recorded 78,000 and 96,000 Roma respectively (Gyergyói, 1990:22, vol.1 ). N.B. At this time the territory of Hungary was much enlarged compared to the present.

<sup>29</sup> For a brief critique of the "absurdity of some of the unintended consequences" (Koulis, 2001:81) in the implementation of this Act see Koulis (2001).

<sup>30</sup> The health status and demographic trends of the Hungarian population as a whole is itself strikingly poor (Kállai and Törzsök, 2000).



12.84% among non-Roma (Kállai and Törzsök, 2000). From 1993 to 2001, the proportion of unemployed Roma in comparison to national unemployment statistics doubled (UNDP, 2002:32). Kertesi's (2003) longitudinal analysis investigates the nature of unemployment among Hungarian Roma. He concludes that low schooling, regional disadvantages and discrimination all contribute to the situation. His study supports the statement that "[u]nemployed Roma workers have dramatically fewer chances than non-Roma workers for entering or re-entering the Hungarian labour market" (UNDP, 2002:32).

There is a circular aspect to the employment situation of Roma, as generally Romany children perform badly at school and are thus not equipped with the training or qualifications needed for the workplace. The educational achievements of Romany pupils are lower than their non-Romany counterparts. Based on data from the age cohort that entered education in the 1981-1982 school year, 88.5% completed compulsory primary school (finished eighth grade), while only 36.5% of Roma did. 8.6% of the non-Roma from this age cohort did not go on to further education after primary school, compared to the majority (66.4%) of Roma who ceased their education at this point (Radó, 1997:6). At every level of schooling, Romany children drop out at a higher rate than non-Romany pupils. In secondary schools, the drop-out rate for Romany children is 40%, while it is only 14% among non-Roma (Kemény, Havas and Kertesi, 1996). Segregation within schools is still widespread in Hungary. Despite the fact that Roma represent less than one-twelfth of the country's population, they constitute 50% of children in schools for the mentally handicapped (Radó, 1997:13).

Similar to the over-representation of Roma in schools for the mentally handicapped, the Roma are over-represented in prisons. According to the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Roma now constitute 60% of the prison population of Hungary (European Roma Rights Center, 2001). A sociological study conducted in 1998 showed that 80% of Hungarian police officers consider Roma violent, and 54% believe that a criminal way of life is a key element in Romany identity (European Roma Rights Center, 1999a). These beliefs manifest themselves in various ways, for instance Human Rights Watch reports that police brutality against Roma remains a significant human rights problem in Hungary (Human Rights Watch, 1999). The 2000 report of the Legal Defence Bureau for

National and Ethnic Minorities (NEKI) details an array of cases in which the police, prosecution or the courts have been negligent or deliberately violated the rights of Romany citizens. The European Roma Rights Center (1999b) documents the physical abuse of a sixteen-year-old young man while in police custody in a town close to my field site. The youth sustained permanent brain injuries as a result of being struck in the head with a truncheon.

Discrimination in institutions is supported by general prejudice among the mainstream population. Negative stereotypes saturate popular notions of the Roma, a topic I turn to in more detail in the next chapter. Lázár's studies, conducted in 1997 into the construction of the Hungarian sense of national identity revealed that 81% of respondents agreed with the statement that "the Roma do not like to work"; 87% that "the Roma have looser morals"; and in a 1992 study, two-thirds of respondents agreed with the statement that "Gypsies will never fit into Hungarian society" (Kállai and Törzsök, 2000). To summarize, 76% of Hungarian respondents said that they had "unfavourable" attitudes towards Roma (Nelson, 1999:304).<sup>31</sup>

For the most part, the Hungarian media simply reinforces these prejudices of mainstream society. Up to 1997 (when new legislation prohibiting the publication of a person's ethnic affiliation was introduced), Roma were routinely referred to in connection with crime reports. The ethnic affiliation of offenders who were not Romany was never reported – only Romany offenders had their ethnicity printed (Kállai and Törzsök, 2000).<sup>32</sup> 49% of Roma agree with the proposition that the way television depicts them is offensive, and 81% agree with the statement that television only show Roma people when there is some problem with them (Bernáth and Messing, 2002:121).

## **2 Historical Overview**

Hungarian Roma have been encouraged, and forced, to change their lifestyles and language under a succession of policies and regimes. The situation of Roma today can only be fully understood in the context of their historical struggles (Guy,

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<sup>31</sup> 1995 survey conducted by USIA (Nelson, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> In 2001, the Roma Press Centre, Budapest, filed a complaint with the Hungarian Associate of Journalists (MUOSZ) after a Hungarian daily newspaper (*Magyar Nemzet*) revealed an individual's Romany identity without his permission (reported by Research Directorate Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada, 2001).



2001:4). For the purpose of this thesis, and in the knowledge that several thorough works have been written on the history of the European Romany population, this chapter skims the relationship between the Hungarian state, Roma and society over the centuries, and rather focuses on the recent trauma that affected the Hungarian Roma: the effects of state socialism and the subsequent transition to a free market, democratic system. Hungarian Roma, such as the adult population of Epervár, are still adjusting to the various consequences of the transition, more helpfully conceived of a 'transformation'.

The first large influx of Roma into Hungary can be dated to around the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>33</sup> There have been three major tumultuous periods for the Roma over the centuries. Maria Theresa (1740-1780) and her son Joseph II (1780–1790) implemented policies with the aim of assimilating Roma into mainstream society. These policies included breaking up families and forbidding the use of folk costume and language. The second extreme action against Roma was the deportation and execution of an estimated 60,000 Roma during Nazi occupation between 1944 and 1945 (European Roma Rights Center, 2000).<sup>34</sup> Jews and Roma were the two ethnic groups designated for annihilation by National Socialist ideology. The third dislocation was state socialism between 1945 and 1989, which viewed the '*Cigány* problem' as a social rather than a cultural problem (in line with socialist theory) and introduced policy accordingly, encouraging school attendance and working towards full employment (see Guy, 2001:3-12). Following the collapse of the regime, this sector of the populace found itself the losing section of society, as unemployment soared among the Roma.

From this general and extremely brief overview of the history of the Hungarian Roma, we shall turn our attention to the history of the *Cigány* settlement in the village of Epervár where I conducted my research. Epervár lies to the east of Hungary, close to the Romanian border, in Hajdú-Bihar county. An historical account of Epervár and its locality relies on a number of sources: memories of *Cigány* villagers; an historical account of the village written by a local *Magyar*; and accounts and analyses of the region's communist party policy in two

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<sup>33</sup> C.f. Angus Fraser (1995) for a pan-European historical overview.

<sup>34</sup> For articles on the Romany experience of the holocaust refer to the Patrin Web Journal, via [www.geocities.com/Paris/5121/holocaust.htm](http://www.geocities.com/Paris/5121/holocaust.htm).



published volumes and from original Hungarian communist documents. The tone of these various accounts are illuminating in themselves. Diószegi's book (a local *Magyar* who had been headmaster of the Epervár school and had been on the 'Hajdú-Bihar county council coordinating expert committee' – the committee that dealt with issues concerning Roma – in the 1970's), published in 1994, contains prejudiced language and ideas. "The inter-twining relationships produced many offspring of limited value. The negative genetic features were passed on to the new generations. While we look back upon the development, we have to remember all the bad things of the past to appreciate the good things of the present!" (1994:48-49).<sup>35</sup> The communist reports, letters and recommendations similarly expound a particular view of the *Cigány* population. The official language is highly stylised, and through its tone and the policies it is clear that the attitude of the communist administration to the Romany citizens was unmistakably paternalistic.<sup>36</sup> Using these documents and the oral account of one main friend and local informant, I sketch a patchy early history of Epervár before focusing on the recent impacts (communism and the post-communist transition) on Epervár Romany life.

In the 1920's and 1930's, the Epervár *Cigány* community was composed of five large families. Including the children and grandparents, each close family (*család*) consisted of nine to ten people. The kinship structure was composed of intertwining relations (*rokoni összefonódás*) and the local history book describes the community as living in a "virtual tribal society" (Diószegi, 1994:48). The Romany community was not allowed to live in the main body of the village. Instead they were allocated land by the river (which is now cane land) where the *Magyars* kept their livestock. This land was unpleasant and of little use or value. Katalin's account of the kinship arrangements of this community differs from Diószegi's account. She told me that relatives were not allowed to inter-marry and therefore spouses were necessarily brought in from neighbouring towns and villages.

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<sup>35</sup> The English translations of the books by Diószegi (1994), Gyergyói (1990) and the communist documents were provided by friends.

<sup>36</sup> Although one could point out that paternalism is generally used to describe the relationship between communist authorities and the population at large during state socialism.



A report on the nature of employment among the Hungarian Romany population in 1890 states that day labourers comprised 36.7%, artisans 28.9%, domestic help 10.37%, musicians 8.6% and unemployed 7.94% of the population (Gyergyói, 1990:23, vol. 1). The *Cigány* population had always performed useful social functions, fulfilling niche services for the majority *Magyar* population. According to Katalin's folk history, in the early 1900's, to earn a living, the Gypsies combined fortune reading and theft. Katalin described how the Romany women would enter *Magyar* households as fortune-tellers. Once in the house where they would do the reading, the women would mentally note which items were worth stealing, and then report back to their husbands, who would later rob the house. This account compares to the contemporary Epervár *Magyar* tale of local Roma stealing chickens, which was often repeated to me by local *Magyars* to explain feelings of animosity towards the local *Cigány*.

From the 1930's onwards, Diószegi (1994) writes, more and more families moved into the settlement, thereby increasing the Romany community population. Until the 1950's, there was one street populated exclusively by Roma, called a *Cigány* row (*cigánysor*), on the outer edge of the village. There was also a separate *Cigány* settlement (*cigánytelep*), the inhabitants of which lived in hovel houses (*putri*). These hovel houses provided minimal shelter. Resembling shanty-style houses, these dwellings were very basic: inadequately constructed, one-room dwellings lacking all basic amenities with inadequate access to water supplies.

## **2.1 Communist Period**

In the period 1950-1986 within the communist bloc, the official strategy was the assimilation of the Roma. To do this, the Hungarian communist government targeted specific areas in their integration programme: employment, education, housing, crime and public health. "In the course of the diligent surmounting of their 'disadvantages', it was necessary to integrate them in those institutions in which everyone else was integrated" (Szalai, 2003). It was believed that through improving the lives of the Romany population, they could combat the ills of the capitalist system of the interwar periods that had left Roma beyond the margins of civilized society. The Communist Party believed that the capitalist society had removed the opportunities of work that Roma had historically relied on in the feudal system, resulting in a rift forming between the Roma and non-Roma to the



detriment of the Roma (Stewart, 2001a:83). Investment was made in improving the Romany population's standard of living by providing secure and proper housing (secure foundations, electricity and access to water). The ambition of full employment was extended to the Roma, and education was targeted, with Romany children being strongly encouraged to attend school through the provision of after-school care and nursery education. Through improving the living conditions of the Roma, through providing them with work and imbuing them with the values of the proletarian worker, it was believed that the Roma would naturally integrate into communist society.

### **2.1.1 Housing**

In Hajdú-Bihar county in 1964, there were 2,044 hovels in which 2,509 families (10,953 people) lived in 60 settlements (Gyergyói, 1990:240, vol.1). By 1978, the number of hovels had been reduced to 748 in which 856 families (3,787 people) lived in 38 settlements. By 1986, the number of settlements has decreased further to 29. 108 families (912 people) continued to live in separated *Cigány* settlements. Councils and local councils provided flats in villages. The properties were either built, bought or let. In Hadráztéglás (a village in Hajdú-Bihar county), for example, the county had provided 115 flats for the Romany population through the sixth Five Year Plan: 82 built, 18 bought and 15 let by the council to Romany tenants. In 1986, there remained only one settlement in Hadráztéglás with seven hovels, home to 12 families (Beszámoló, 1986:6).

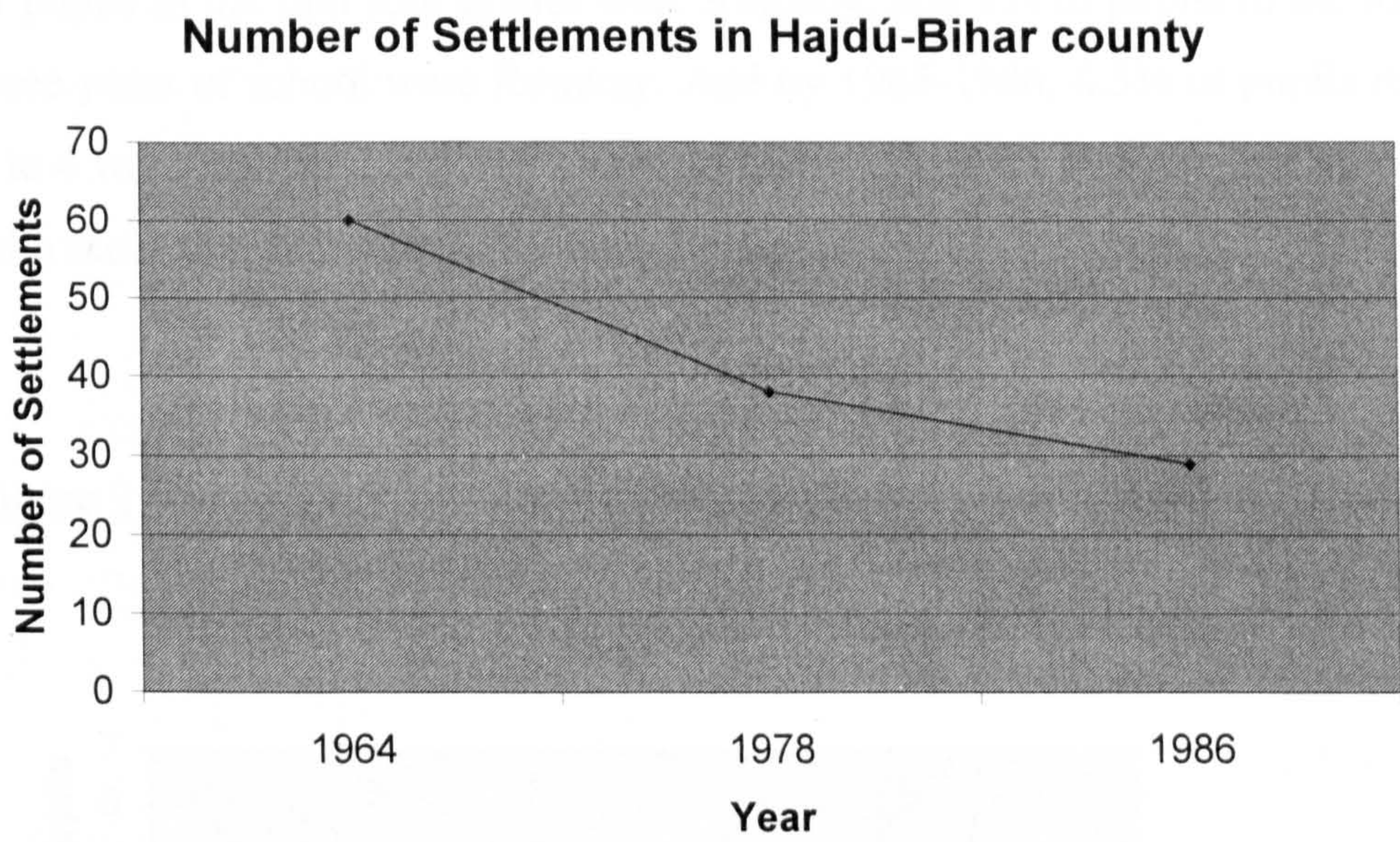
The communist authorities report that while their relocation policy and the building of flats and houses for the Roma were partially successful, the number of new homes built compared to the number of hovels that remained were not in direct relation because of the increase in population. While a large number of people were moving out of the settlements into the villages, a substantial number of young people grew up and started families of their own in the hovels.

Additionally, the authorities found that providing quality housing did not guarantee the residents' adoption of the social norms as perceived by the communists. "Unfortunately, there are still a number of families who do not keep



their flats clean, do not look after their flats and do not comply with the basic norms of socialist co-existence” (Beszámoló, 1986:7).<sup>37</sup>

Figure 1



**2.1.2 Education**

In 1950, in the region of Epervár, many Romany children did not go to school as they had to work as agricultural labourers in the autumn (Gyergyói, 1990:264, vol.1). A lack of clothing and a lack of shoes were some of the other reasons why children chose not to go to school. The communists encouraged school attendance through a variety of strategies. They attacked segregation as a policy that “can later cause difficulties in their social assimilation” (Tájékoztató, 1974:8). Rather, they believed that kindergarten education and after-school care would have a beneficial impact on the children.

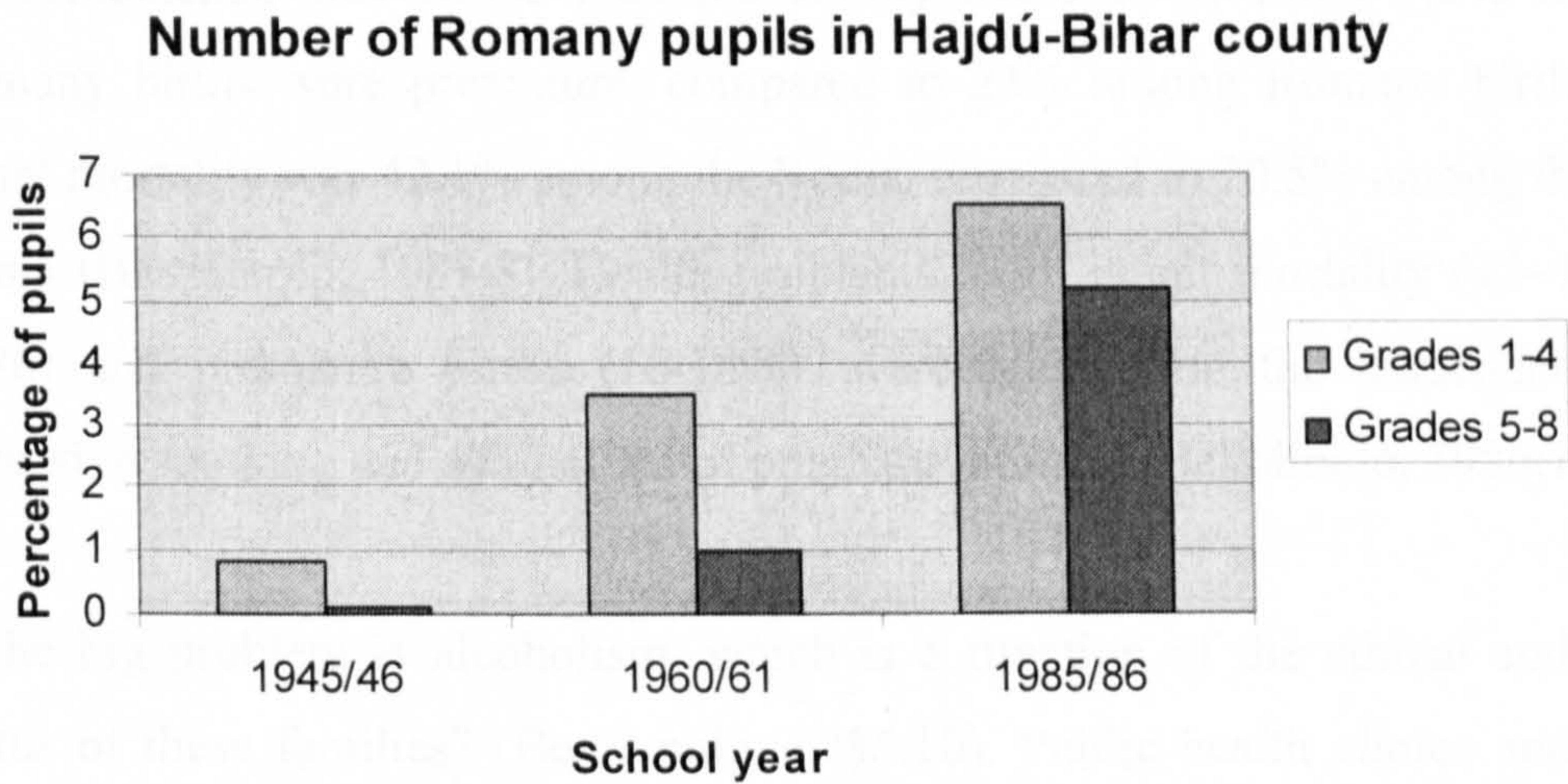
In Hajdú-Bihar county in 1986, 64% of kindergarten-aged Romany children attended. The 1986 Hajdú-Bihar county report expounds that while the graduation of children from kindergarten to first year is good, the journey from first to eighth grade is not as successful. Only 38-40% of pupils reached eighth grade and, 15% of pupils repeated years (Beszámoló, 1986:7).

<sup>37</sup> “*Tiszta udvar, rendes ház*” (Clean yard, orderly house) was inscribed on plaques that were awarded to the most well-kept properties. The house and its standard of cleanliness took on a real significance in the communist regime as an indicator of the housekeeper’s moral and social standing.



Despite the uneasy progress of many Romany pupils through school, from 1945 to 1986, school attendance in the county steadily increased, reaching its peak in the 1980-1981 school year.<sup>38</sup> In 1945-1946 in grades 1 to 4, 0.8% of pupils were Romany and 0.1% of pupils in grades 5 to 8 were Romany. By 1960-1961, 3.5% of pupils in the first four grades were Romany, and 1% of pupils in the following three years of school were Romany. And by 1985-1986, 6.5% of pupils in grades 1 to 4 were Romany, and 5.2% were Romany in years 5 to 8, slightly more in line with their representation in the broader population.

Figure 2



This pattern was similarly reflected in other age cohorts and schools. In 1970-1971 there were 11 Romany pupils in grammar schools (academic subjects only) in Hajdú-Bihar county, but by 1980-1981 there were 24. As for comprehensive schools (trade and academic subjects), in 1970-1971 there were 6 Romany pupils, rising to 12 in 1985-1986, and over the same period, Romany pupils attendance at trade school rose from 52 to 115.<sup>39</sup>

In regard to further education, while the number of Romany pupils graduating from eighth grade to further education establishments rose, the report states that

<sup>38</sup> After this, the attendance level at school declined, with the 1985-1986 figures showing a drop in the number of Romany pupils across the board (only trade school and kindergarten attendance continued to rise).

<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately the reports do not provide a similar breakdown of the total number of pupils (Roma and non-Roma) attending these institutions.



there has been a huge increase in applications, not reflected in the admission level. To combat this, the 1986 Hajdú-Bihar county report (Beszámoló) advocates the establishment of county scholarships. This would involve coordination with local firms and factories to get financial support for pupils in further education. The role of social workers (*családgondozó*), as trained staff able to pay particular attention to the further education of pupils, was also emphasized as a successful strategy that should be extended to settlements lacking social workers. A reward system to recognize the work of social workers with the best record in regard to getting pupils to finish further education is suggested in the 1986 report.

### **2.1.3 Health**

The health conditions of Roma living in Hajdú-Bihar county, particularly those in the settlements, was worse than the county average. In 1981, 9.2% of non-Romany births were premature, compared to 23% among Romany births, and infant mortality was 42.1% among the Roma, compared to 20.5% among the non-Roma (Beszámoló, 1981:8). Health problems, high infant mortality (12–15% in 1986) and premature births (16-18%), were blamed on the inadequate diet, excessive smoking and alcoholism of pregnant mothers (Beszámoló, 1986:10).

“The big problem is alcoholism, which is a function of the ethical and social status of these families” (Beszámoló, 1986:10). Public health clinics and social support are two strategies of improving the health record among the Romany population, although moving people out of the settlements’ “mode of living” was seen to be the most effective way of tackling the health problems.

### **2.1.4 Employment**

The Romany population’s employment situation changed dramatically due to the communist policy of creating full employment. In 1961 across Hungary, it was estimated that 33% of Roma capable of working were permanently employed, 32% did casual labour and 35% had no work at all. By 1974, three-fourths of *Cigány* men aged 15 to 59 were in permanent employment and 5.7 % of this sector of the population did casual labour. The 1978 report boasts that 80-90% of Hungarian *Cigány* men capable of work were employed. Those members of the population who were not employed consisted of students going on to further education, soldiers, people pensioned off and those incapable of working.



By 1978 across Hungary, only 3-4% of the *Cigány* population was employed in the traditional Romany occupations as musicians, knife-grinders, broom-makers and horse traders (Jelentés, 1978:4). Romany men were rather employed in the building and road construction industry (30%), loading and transport, cleaners and unskilled positions (30%), miners (2.3%), metal workers (1.5%), etc. (Kemény, Rupp, Csalog and Havas, 1976).

In 1986, the level of employment among men in Hajdú-Bihar county had continued to rise steadily, peaking at 90% having risen from 84% in 1981 and 76% in 1976 – matching the employment ratio of the non-Romany male population. However, these figures tell only a portion of the story. The report goes on to say that an “obstacle to employment of *Cigánys* is that certain *Cigánys* frequently change employment and cannot hold down a job” (Beszámoló, 1986:5). In fact, only 58.6% of men capable of working had continual, stable employment. This idea of the Romany population ingesting communist policy and interpreting it in their own particular way, a reminder of the story behind the facts, is very important to bear in mind when analyzing the impression created by statistics from this period. However, László’s personal reminiscences support the picture of full employment. According to him, between 1970 and 1989, every Epervár *Cigány* worked.

Some of the sources of later problems can be traced in documents of this period. The communist reports state that while agricultural cooperatives may have employed Roma as seasonal workers or as occasional workers, they were not accepted as *members* of the cooperative. The 1978 communist report cites a “growing aversion” (Jelentés, 1978:5) to employing *Cigánys*. Reasons cited by employers as to why they do not want to employ Roma includes reference to the Roma’s unsatisfactory level of hygiene. In the area of Epervár in 1973, there were 100 Romany members of cooperatives and 5 employees, and in 1974 the number of members of local cooperatives had reached 120 (Gyergyói, 1990: 205, vol. 1).

The Epervár region relied more on agriculture than other regions in Hajdú-Bihar county. In the region, 66 people worked in agriculture while only 21 people worked in factories and eight in other places. In comparison to the distribution of work in the county, 23.9% working in agriculture and 47.5% in industry, the



emphasis in the Epervár region is much more on agriculture than is the norm in other parts of the county (Gyergyói, 1990:628, vol. 2). It therefore follows, as stories from local *Cigány* support, that a substantial number of Epervár Roma did work in agriculture.

According to Diószegi, in Epervár only a few Roma had been employed in the Epervár agricultural cooperative, the Red Star Agricultural Producers' Cooperative.<sup>40</sup> Most worked for the regional cooperatives or worked on road construction (Diószegi, 1994:49). However, the personal account of an Epervár *Cigány* man, László, differs slightly. László recalls that there were two state-owned agricultural cooperatives and one state-owned industrial cooperative in Epervár, and all gave work to the local Roma. The industrial cooperative employed labourers for construction work and, as it was based in Epervár, employed older Roma and *Cigánys* with families. The younger generation (of which László was one) worked in either Debrecen or Budapest at larger cooperatives. He estimates that 70% of the young people commuted, and 30% worked locally. László would take the "*Fekete Vonat*" (Black Train)<sup>41</sup> to and from Budapest every week, where he worked in a cotton-weaving factory. After working in Budapest, László worked at a lumbering factory and then at a leather-treating factory in Debrecen.

The employment of women was an issue never successfully tackled by the government. Employment, in Hajdu-Bihar county, reached a level of 23% in 1976 and stagnated there (Beszámoló 1981:2). The major problem identified in the 1986 Hajdú-Bihar report was women's lack of education and trade skills. Another problem was the childcare responsibilities of women. In Hadrásztelek, a neighbouring community in Hajdú-Bihar county for which we have exact figures, 30% of women worked, but employment was made difficult by the fact that they

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<sup>40</sup> For an insightful comparative study of the "re-transformation" of Hungarian agricultural cooperatives since the collapse of communism, with one example a village in Hajdú-Bihar county, refer to Ieda, 2001.

<sup>41</sup> The *Fekete Vonat* (Black Train) was a commuter train that travelled from Mátészalka in the east to Budapest, carrying Romany workers to their workplace and back to their homes on a weekly basis. There is evidence that a general fear of travelling by train on Friday evenings still prevails as I was warned on a couple of occasions to avoid such journeys because of the "drunken *Cigány*". The symbolism of this train journey has been reappropriated by a contemporary and highly successful Budapest Romany rap band called *Fekete Vonat*.



could not take up work in the countryside as they had to look after their children, and employment opportunities within the village required specialist skills.

Hungary was referred to as the 'happiest' country in the Eastern bloc due to the nature of Kádár's 'reform' communism. Hungary's flourishing 'second economy' based on private enterprise during the 1970's and 1980's illustrates Kádár's particular interpretation of state socialism (Stark and Bruszt, 1998). This dimension of social life was not wholly stifled, but rather played an important role in the society. As Hann suggests, "Informal, 'non public networks' play a vital role in the actual social organization of socialist societies" (Hann, 1992:19). Many Hungarian peasants reinterpreted state socialism by choosing to take the "Third Road" of a mixed economy (Szelényi, 1988). Szalai (2003) argues that while non-Romany workers benefited from this compromise with the authorities, Romany employees were excluded from it. This resulted, post-state socialism, in *Magyars* having the ability, skills and knowledge to cope with the transition, while *Cigánys*, excluded from the learning process of the "two-pillar" way of existence (Szalai, 2003), were left unable to cope in the capitalist economy. I argue that not all Roma found themselves excluded from informal networks, but some managed to carve a second pillar of their own in terms of cultural autonomy and livelihood strategies. Stewart, for example, criticizes both the Communist Party and the work of a modern Hungarian sociologist for failing to acknowledge that "Gypsies were already intimately integrated into Hungarian society... and yet had maintained their distinct ideology" (2001a:83-84). The Romany population responded to the communist policies in their own unique way, negotiating their position with the state socialist system just as they had done under previous regimes. Certain statistics give insight into this. For example, as we saw above, the fact that more than 40% of *Cigány* men capable of working had stable, long-term employment – and therefore 60% did not – suggests a degree of resistance to the proletariat work ethic that the government was encouraging. Epervár Roma would take unpaid holidays during the hamstering<sup>42</sup> seasons, returning to the cooperatives once the hamstering season was over. This is a perfect example of second-economy enterprise flourishing despite the restrictions and ambitions of the state-socialist economy. One of the explanations for people's involvement in the informal

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<sup>42</sup> Hamstering is a local economic enterprise that involves catching wild hamsters and selling their fur. Hamstering is discussed in detail in Section 2.1.1.



economy is to resist, either effectively or symbolically, the controlling government (Smith, 1989:311). This explanation can helpfully be applied to the Roma's relationship with the state socialist economy.<sup>43</sup>

## 2.2 Post-Communism

The adult generation of Epervár has lived through the transitional period since 1989, when capitalist democracy replaced the old state socialist regime. In fact, it was during the 1980's that the first market-oriented reforms were introduced in Hungary. In consequence, in the middle of the 1980's, the employment ratio began to decline (Kemény, 2002:69; Kertesi, 2003). After 1989, Hungary implemented rather fast and radical institutional change: privatized public property at open auctions, liberalized prices, trade, and foreign exchange, and implemented mass reforms of the banking system (Szelényi, 2001:45). It is a common phenomenon that, because Roma formed the lowest positions within work places, remaining on the margins of the workforce –many acting like human “workhorses” (Kertesi and Szirácski, 1985:243) – they were the first to lose their jobs following the change to a market economy. Following a period of almost full employment under communism, the Romany population came to be defined by unemployment. It would be too simplistic to conclude that state socialism had created a utopia (employment, housing, education) for the Hungarian Romany population, rather the communist policy created a fragile structure with no solid or lasting foundations (Kállai, 2002:40; Stewart 2001a:86).

Throughout the Epervár *Cigány* settlement, the general opinion is that living standards have steadily decreased since 1989. Unemployment among the Epervár Roma, according to Pál, is somewhere between 90 and 100%. Employment levels in the village reflect the general trend across the country according to NGOs, which estimate that between 60-80% of men and 35-40% of women are unemployed, with levels soaring to 100% in some villages (European Roma Rights Center, 1999a). Official unemployment figures are more conservative, as we saw above. One of the reasons for this discrepancy is the fact that NGOs include as unemployed the significant proportion of Roma who fall into the

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<sup>43</sup> Ethnographies on Roma write of the Roma's ideological resistance to participating in wage labour (Stewart, 1997; Sutherland, 1975; Rehfish, 1975; Gay Y Blasco, 1999a), although Horváth's recent work shows that if Roma 'Gypsify' the workplace this need not be the case (forthcoming). Westwood (1984) analyses a similar strategy employed by British women domesticating their workplace.



category of “passive unemployed” (Kemény, 2002:70). In Epervár, these people are either in receipt of disability allowance or pensions, or would like to work (and do so within the invisible economy) but are not actively registered unemployed. Official figures of unemployment do not give an accurate picture of economic activities within communities. Business, as this thesis will explore, is operating at many sub-levels below the official employment measures, the invisible economy is the clearest source of income when one spends time viewing economic occupations from the inside. As this thesis shall explore, men are rarely not involved in some sort of business initiative, but these profit-orientated schemes fall into the shadow of formal, legal, registered business. These are the activities of the ‘invisible economy’.

The change from almost full employment to nearly total unemployment, the cessation of local youth organizations, the high rise in living costs (with bread and petrol much more expensive than fifteen years previously) not accompanied by a similar rise in wage and benefits, and their increased stigmatization due to skin colour are all changes that the Epervár Roma note. Szelényi’s study (2001), which in part explores how people remember socialism, supports, on a cross-national scale, the nostalgic attitude that looks to communism through ‘rose-tinted glasses’. Szelényi approaches the subject through the concept of poverty to understand how socialism lives on today in the collective mind of people who grew up under the system. Both non-Romany Hungarians and Hungarian Roma reported a decline of poverty and relative deprivation throughout the state socialist era. Since 1988, poverty has increased sharply among Hungarian Roma compared to their non-Romany counterparts: “those who report that they were not poor at all declines from 88% to 73% among non-Roma Hungarians, among Hungarian Roma the same drops from 71% to 33%” (Szelényi, 2001:72).

The standard of health among the Epervár Roma is also today visibly poor. Several people in their mid-fifties need oxygen tanks to assist their breathing as they sleep. I knew no one in the settlement older than sixty. Of my close acquaintances: two men had legs amputated due to a blood disease; two men suffered a level of diabetes that pronounced them unfit for work; several mid-thirty-year-old ladies confided in me that they were suffering from hair loss and everyone, children and adults, had rotten and missing teeth. “Look at our teeth.



That is because we don't have the money to buy healthy food for our children". A lack of resources and a lack of information are a lethal combination.

The effects of long term unemployment are not just on the physical conditions of life. As a child, László would go to chess club after school, as a teenager he went on his motorbike to local discos with his *Magyar* friend, now there are no such opportunities for his son to either mix with *Magyars* or to take part in such social pastimes. It is these stories I was told when I asked about the differences since 1989. László was very fond of telling me how much you could have bought with 2,000 HUF in the 1970's, and how little the same amount of money would buy you now.<sup>44</sup> According to László, in the 1970s two kilos of bread cost 7 HUF; in 2003 two kilos of bread costs 280 HUF: bread is now forty times more expensive while their wages have risen by a factor of twenty or so.<sup>45</sup> The Roma feel that they are continually struggling to make ends meet in conditions that are increasingly inhospitable. Every year it is more difficult to stretch their benefits, every year the winter conditions are slightly more desperate.<sup>46</sup>

While there was no discourse in the settlement about communism, pointed questioning would illicit insightful comments. It was easy to engage people with the topic of the general drop in living standards over the past decade and, if pressed, people were aware that the regime change was a partial explanation. As László said, "the system was completely different" ("*Az a rendszer egész más volt*"), but such statements were rarely elaborated on. More urgent were the demands that the present had on their lives. However, the situation is neither comparable to Stewart's observation that the Roma did not engage with the everyday necessity of working in the factory (1997:141), nor to Gay Y Blasco's discovery that pursuing the topic of social memory among the *Gitanos* of Spain was pointless as they do not look to a historical or mythical past in explaining their way of life (1999a:13-14 and 50-53) as, through pointed questioning I could find something out about the local experiences of communism.

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<sup>44</sup> HUF is the conventional notation used for the Hungarian forint. During my fieldwork, the value of the forint fluctuated slightly: in September 2000 there were 432 HUF to 1 GBP and in September 2001 there were 405 HUF to 1 GBP.

<sup>45</sup> Across Hungary from 1995 to 1996, real wages dropped by 12%, the real value of pensions by 25% and household consumption by 8% (Marer, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> Tóth (1999) writes that 69% of all Romany households are poor, and some 72% of those living in families in which the head of the family is Romany are poor.



The prediction that introducing a free market will eventually reduce inequality and poverty, following an initial increase in them as markets expand, has not been supported in Epervár.<sup>47</sup> Rather, Emigh et al.'s theory (2001) that the Roma will form a group locked into long-term structural unemployment with neither the skills nor education demanded in a diversified economy seems to be, to an extent, supported by the Epervár Roma's experience.<sup>48</sup> Life has not improved for the Roma of Epervár, despite evidence that the Hungarian economy is now rising from 'the trough' (see below). As articulated by the Roma of Epervár: life has been getting harder and harder since 1989 and will continue to do so.

Between 1994 and 2000, the Hungarian economy grew in strength, the number of employed increased and the number of registered unemployed decreased. In 1998 and 1999, approximately 200,000 more people found work (Kemény, 2002:72). "The proportion of Gypsies within this 200,000 increase is unknown, but we estimate it somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000" (Kemény, 2002:72-73). Kemény does not explain how this increase has been calculated, so we do not know if it has been calculated in line with Szelényi's study. What is certain is that, despite the economic growth of the state and Kemény's optimism, the Roma of Epervár did not feel the positive benefits of this growth. One reaction to this state of affairs has been the migration of Roma from Epervár to Canada where they hope to find work and leave behind the miserable living conditions of Hungary. On a national scale this has become a growing phenomenon. In 2000, 1936 Hungarian citizens (probably Roma) applied for refugee status (Kováts, 2002:17).<sup>49</sup> Among these 1936 people were Zsolt, his wife and two daughters. László's brother, Zsolt, and his family moved to Canada for eleven months (the time it took for their application for refugee status to be rejected) to join Zsolt's wife's sister's family; an Epervár woman was temporarily living and working in Canada while her Romanian Romany husband stayed in the village; one of László's brother-in-law permanently emigrated to Canada in the early 1990s with two of his sons; and during my time in the village I was asked for advice from two

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<sup>47</sup> It is not possible to make general statements about 'post-communist' or 'transition' markets as the experiences of each country differs (Burawoy and Verdery, 1999; Mandel and Humphrey, 2002). Mandel and Humphrey ask a pertinent question, "Given the rapid changes in all the transition countries and the different ways they have emerged... for how long can we really work with the category called 'postsocialism'?" (2002:3).

<sup>48</sup> Powell (1997:91) provides evidence to support his claim that Czech/Slovak Roma form an 'underclass'.

<sup>49</sup> Of these 1936 Hungarian citizens, 343 were granted refugee status (Kováts, 2002:17).



women who were considering going to work as cleaners in New York, U.S.A. These people have left Hungary in the hope of a better life in the face of unemployment and discrimination in Hungary, although few believed that they would remain in Canada. During their time abroad they remained in contact with their family (*család*) at home. Zsolt would regularly phone László, passing on his news about his work as a painter/decorator, the amazing shops with rows and rows of food and his daughter's progress at school (to everyone's delight she had made friends with a black girl). Zsolt also continued to be involved with his *testvér* through economic dealings over the phone from Canada (discussed in Chapter Three). As László was being wheeled into the operating room to have his second leg amputated, Zsolt called him on his mobile to wish him well. The close family (*család*) ties remained strong, something that was possible because of the relative cheap cost of telephoning in Canada, and a "free" landline that close *testvér* of László's had managed to rig up. Zsolt's family returned to Epervár more prosperous (although Zsolt was arrested at the Budapest airport for an outstanding crime) and with Zsolt's wife vowing that they would return, looking with new disdain on settlement life.

One of the main motivations for this migration is lack of work opportunities. Many Epervár Roma cite one of the significant changes as being that now employers no longer employ *Cigánys*. László recalls that, under communism, if you were Rom and had a good education, one had the opportunity for a better life: one was not confined to a life of hard, physical labour. With former cooperatives now in private hands, employers are able to pick who they would like to employ, and invariably it is not the Romany applicant (supported by Kertesi, 2003). The abiding feeling in the settlement is that, under communism there was not differentiation in the workplace based on ethnicity, and now there is. "There was no such thing that this person is a *Cigány* or whoever; he was employed. It doesn't go like that today" ("*Nem volt olyan, hogy ez cigány vagy bárki, alkalmazták, a jelen nem így megy*") says László. This statement, along with stories of Epervár *Cigány* labourers being refused work based on ethnicity, supports current thinking that since communism there has been increasing differentiation of people according to their ethnicity. Personal accounts from *Romungro* refer to their own growing awareness and realization that they are *Cigány* – based on the way that they are perceived and treated by mainstream society.



This is the situation despite liberal reforms of the market and the introduction of government legislation to encourage the employment of Roma and make discrimination in the workplace illegal. The Hungarian liberal democracy supports multiculturalism and equality of opportunity, but it has been argued that the new political climate is leading to a situation where there is an ethnicization of social and ethnic minority policy, leading to an unhealthy blurring between ethnicity and poverty, and a potentially harmful reconfiguration of who constitutes ‘the needy’ (see Szalai, 2003). A *Magyar* young man told me that his father, a factory owner in a town to the north of Debrecen, had employed local Roma to qualify for a government initiative tax break scheme. On the day of the most recent solar eclipse (in the summer of 1999), the Romany entrepreneurs refused to leave their homes to go to work, fearing the eclipse. As the young man laughed at the recollection of the “foolish *Cigány*”, he surmised that his father would never again employ Roma as they were unreliable and lazy. This is one example of the conflation of the issues at the local level. In this instance the *Magyar* employer took advantage of a government scheme as was designed, but when the Roma acted according to negative stereotypes, the non-Romany employer was able to discount working with *Cigány* again as they had proved themselves to be foolish and incompetent, and therefore deserved their position in society. This is the climate that the Epervár Roma are negotiating their lives in. As Chapter Four on economic strategies shall make clear, by and large the Epervár Roma are successfully negotiating their livelihoods in this ambiguous environment.

## Chapter Two

### Being Cigány

#### 1 Introduction

“We used to all play football together down at the school, but now look, the youngsters here have nothing to do”, bemoaned László. The football pitch was on the school grounds in the centre of the village and, conscious of their ethnic identity, many of the children felt uncomfortable playing there and so were confined to the settlement where there were no play facilities. Those young men that did play football down at the school were mostly school drop-outs who found the fear of meeting old teachers part of the thrill of the game.

With the *Cigány-Magyar* ethnic divide becoming more pronounced in this post-socialist period, and with the implications that this has for the economic, political and social situation of the Romany minority, it is instructive to understand local expressions of identity. By focusing on recurrent, key themes that are understood locally to be indicators of *Cigány* identity, I shall unpick the category *Cigány* to try and understand what it means to the residents of the Epervár settlement. This approach uncovers the ambiguity and ambivalence of this category as a marker of identification, and encourages one to view ‘being *Cigány*’ as a process. In many respects, it would be easy to conclude that there are two worlds in Epervár: that of the *Magyars* and that of the Roma. However, by examining instances of interaction and articulation of identity, it becomes clear that the distinction is far from rigid. It is this flexibility of identity that some local entrepreneurs manipulate as a business strategy (see Chapter Four on economic strategies). Despite ambivalence towards being *Cigány* as an expression of identity, in the final analysis there is a great pride and awareness of being *Cigány*. While this pride has often been articulated as moral superiority in other Romany groups, for the *Romungro* of Epervár superiority and morality are not part of the discourse. In this chapter, I shall introduce the main themes and preoccupations of the Epervár *Cigány* and in doing so aim to convey the unique atmosphere of settlement life. Appreciating the values of this community is essential if one is to understand the fractious relationship between marginalized Hungarian Roma and civil society initiatives.



I begin by unpacking the term *Cigány* by addressing key themes within the society that are local understandings of being *Cigány*. Epervár Roma are continually performing and alluding to their status as *Cigánys*, and it is these recurring themes, as expressed by the Epervár Roma themselves, that I shall work with in this chapter. I shall also report on local *Magyars*' views of Roma in an attempt to add depth to the picture. Through this strategy, we shall gain an understanding of what it is to be *Cigány* in Hungary today: the complexity of this category simply reflecting the layers and subtleties of the situation. The boundaries between the Roma and the majority society are permeable (Barth, 1969), and it is this permeability that I discuss here.<sup>50</sup> In such a discussion, it is helpful to think of ethnicization and racialization as political, social, cultural and psychological processes (Brubaker, 2002). Understanding how these categories are manoeuvred by the people themselves, and in doing so recognizing the situational context of "groupness" (Brubaker, 2002), is important in appreciating the situation for Roma. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the category *Cigány* has been manipulated for political purposes by a succession of governments with Hungarian Roma being the subject of legislation intent on control and imposition over a period of centuries. To be *Cigány* has been regarded as a cultural and then a social 'problem' in turn. Today, *Romungro* are arguably the most assimilated group of Roma in Hungary. Speaking only Hungarian, not restricted in dress by codes concerning the pollutive nature of the lower body or by a need to cover the head, often not employed in tasks traditionally associated with the Roma, this group of people superficially present themselves as assimilated members of modern Hungarian society. Census results highlight people's preference to disassociate themselves from being Roma and sociologists struggle to devise a methodology to successfully identify *Cigány*. The problematic nature of this category is indisputable. In this chapter I shall explore what being *Cigány* means to the Epervár Roma, demonstrating that *Cigány* is not a bounded ethnic group, but rather a series of processes.

Many *Magyars* have a firm notion that *Cigánys* represent all that is bad and unattractive. *Cigánys* are regarded as socially and morally inferior by the majority of the Hungarian population, and this is reflected in everyday *Magyar* discourse

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<sup>50</sup> For a further discussion of the permeability of these boundaries, see the later chapter on passing as a strategy in business initiatives.



and exchange.<sup>51</sup> As other ethnographers have argued, there is a very circular, interdependent relationship between mainstream stereotypes and some of *Cigánys*' behavioural traits (Shunear, 1997; Lemon, 1996; Sutherland, 1975). To be *Cigány* is intrinsically linked with the majority population, for the very specific, often negative, stereotypes they hold about *Cigánys* are arguably internalized or rejected or played with by the Romany community. In this analysis however, I hope to avoid the criticism levied by Gay Y Blasco that: "Accounts of Gypsy life regularly reduce the Gypsies' understanding of themselves to the stereotypes that they hold of themselves and the non-Gypsies, and the actual processes through which Gypsies reach out (or not) to other Gypsies have generally been left untheorized" (2001:644). In regard to this critique, the stereotypes that *Cigánys* hold of themselves consistently influences *Cigánys*' speech, behaviour and idealized view of themselves, and is therefore arguably a legitimate area of study in the construction of a rounded picture of Epervár Roma. The overlap between stereotypes and internalized self-analysis means that one cannot look at stereotypes in isolation, nor disregard them. As we shall see it is very difficult, and arguably counter-productive, to disentangle the "stereotypes" from the "actual process through which Gypsies reach out". The *Cigánys* of Epervár have an assortment of means and methods of "reaching out", and our ability to understand these is heightened by acknowledging the role that stereotypes play in these processes. Therefore I am not simply repeating stereotypes, but rather presenting the Roma's view of themselves, as *Cigánys*, and in doing so recognize the importance that these stereotypes have in the modern Roma self-image. The evidence presented in this chapter should communicate the ambiguity of this situation for *Cigánys*.

Ethnographic insight into this group of Roma, about which relatively little is known, is important in understanding the context in which local economic enterprises develop. Neither neighbouring *Magyar* villagers nor well-intentioned NGOs know how social interaction operates on the small-scale of such a rural Romany community. In this chapter I present a dual view of the world in which

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<sup>51</sup> A programme broadcast on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2003 on the Hungarian MTV channel invited viewers to add their thoughts to the discussion between the presenter, the chief editor of Radio C (Romany Budapest radio station) and an eminent Hungarian sociologist. The tone of the majority of text messages was negative, "They steal", "They don't want to work – there's always work for those that want it", "Why do such poor people have 6 – 8 children?" and "If there weren't *Cigánys*, there wouldn't be a question".



*Cigánys* divide people into two categories: ‘*Cigány*’ or ‘Other’. *Cigánys* pay little attention to the every day lives and pre-occupations of *Magyars*: they are simply regarded as a body of people nestling on the fringes of the *Cigány* world-view. How the *Magyars* occupy themselves and the daily interactions of the community do not pass into the consciousness of the Romany community and they hold no clearly articulated picture, either negative or positive, of the *Magyars*. However, at the same time, I shall present another, less clearly expressed, world-view that sees the categories *Magyar* and *Cigány* not as exclusive, but as ambiguously intertwined.

My use of the categories that follow, arose from my fieldwork experiences.<sup>52</sup> By situating them in the Epervár *Cigány* context, I hope to convey a sense of place and atmosphere from which to explore the themes of this thesis: the conflict between local understandings of extended family (*testvér*) allegiance, economic enterprise and trust and the values of a Hungarian NGO’s community development scheme.

## 2 The Categories *Cigány* and *Magyar*

The use of the labels, *Cigány* and *Magyar*, by *Cigánys*, is important in appreciating the *Cigánys*’ image of themselves and their relationship with other groups. In Hungarian, “*Cigány*” is widely considered to be a pejorative term, carrying with it a great deal of social stigma, yet it is the word used daily, most often with no sense of shame, by the Epervár Romany community. I arrived at the village apprehensive of how my intended research would be received: would insult be taken when I said “I am here to study the life of you *Cigánys*”? I was apprehensive of this. Fortunately for me, my first encounters were hugely encouraging, and this positive attitude from the Roma continued throughout my stay. There was a pride and awareness of ethnicity and I was actively encouraged

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<sup>52</sup> Kemény identifies one of the three main linguistic groups to be Hungarian Gypsies or *Romungro*, who speak Hungarian and who call themselves “musician Gypsies” (Kemény, 2002:28), Szúhay also uses this classification for *Romungro*, they “prefer the term “musicians”” (Szuhay, 2002:24). Academics who visited me in the field assumed the same, “So, you are ‘*muzsikus Cigány*’?” Every time a blank face met this semi-statement, until after repetition the answer would be to list all the *testvér* (extended family) who could play instruments and any who did so for a living – the Epervár *Romungro* do not call themselves ‘musician’ *Cigány*. For the historical context of *Romungro* performing music refer to Sárosi (1978).



to take notes, “write a book” and let the world know how the *Cigánys* live. “Tell them that we want to work”. “Tell them how hungry we are”. On my first day in the settlement looking for somewhere to live and explaining why, a *bácsi* (old man) urged me to “write something, anything, for England so that they know that *Cigánys* are not dirty and smelly and thieving”. Once I had been in the field for a few months and had become a familiar figure in the daily life of the community, I was told, “Now, you know how much we work”, “Now you know how hard our life is and how hungry we are. If we have food we eat, if there is none we don’t” and all the time I was urged to relay this information. “All we need are jobs so that our men can work”, an elderly lady told me, gesturing to the Romany men out doing their business.

‘*Roma*’<sup>53</sup> is a term that intellectual members of this ethnic group and politically aware non-Roma are trying to encourage as a label that supposedly carries with it no negative stereotypes and historical undertones. ‘*Cigány*’ is a pejorative term that was imposed by outsiders who looked down upon the *Cigánys*, and its usage today in a variety of contexts reflects and embodies these discriminatory attitudes. Encouraging people to use *Roma* instead of *Cigány* compares to the situation in the United States, where the civil rights movement promoted the usage of ‘black’, as opposed to ‘nigger’, as a politically correct term that could not be used to cause offence.<sup>54</sup> However, by placing all *Cigánys* as one people/race, the term *Roma* is inseparable from an alternative historical picture equally imbued with particular values.<sup>55</sup> In certain situations and to an increasing degree ‘*Roma*’ is being used, but ‘*Cigány*’ remains the commonly used word among *Cigány* community members. In all the villages I visited and in Budapest, *Cigány* is the word used by this ethnic minority to identify themselves and other members of their community. It is not just a label, but an embodiment of identity. The complexity of the situation is perhaps best illustrated by László, who recognized the significance of the terminology, stating that he would rather be called *Roma* as “it cannot be used against us”, while using the term *Cigány* on a daily basis. The word *Roma* cannot be flung at this group as an insult, but neither is it a word that embodies their sense of self. So, in Epervár, despite the awareness of the term ‘*Roma*’, ‘*Cigány*’

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<sup>53</sup> ‘*Roma*’ means “men” in Romani.

<sup>54</sup> Ironically, a *Cigány* man was known in the community as “*Néger*” meaning “nigger”. He was bestowed this nick-name because of his dark skin.

<sup>55</sup> There is evidence of Romany groups who would prefer to be called Gypsy in the official language of their country of residence (Barany, 2002:1, footnote).



remains the word used by both *Cigánys* themselves and their *Magyar* counterparts to define who they are. This status is not up for questioning: these people are *Cigány*.

The dichotomy between *Magyar* and *Cigány* exists in everyday discourse. When telling a story about someone or referring to any incident, the speaker often identifies the ethnicity of the actors, e.g. “That *Cigány* boy ...”, or “So I told the *Magyar* lady ...”. This is a classificatory device which helps to identify people and adds depth and explanation to stories. As well as this, the daily utilization of these terms constantly reaffirms the division between the two communities. On a conscious level, the world is divided in two. While the language is non-discriminatory, and the *Cigánys* are proud of their ethnicity and community, this style of speech places importance on the ethnic status of the individual and his/her membership of a larger social construction. The *Magyars* of the story are not belittled, just as the *Cigánys* of the story are not celebrated, but the language feeds into a dualistic world view. Therefore, throughout this work, just as I label non-Romany Hungarian citizens “*Magyar*”, as the *Cigány* community does, so I use the term “*Cigány*”. It is only through working with local models and utilizing local terminology that we can successfully comprehend the Epervár *Cigány* community world view. A U.S. researcher decided to label *Cigánys* (the focus of his study) as “Roma”, yet used the label “*Magyar*” for non-Roma as this was the term the Roma applied to people who are not them (from a lecture given by the researcher). However, as explained above, *Cigánys* rarely use the label “Roma” as a label of self-identification. Such a categorizing system is therefore unhelpful. In this thesis, I shall work with local terms, models and categories to facilitate insight into the view of the world according to this community, and understand how divisions are conceptualized, created and confirmed.

Within the all-encompassing grouping of ‘Hungarian Roma’, there are three well-documented sub-groups. Boundaries not only exist between *Cigány* and *Magyar*, but between different groups of Roma too. *Romungro*, Vlach and Beash groups enjoy a hierarchical relationship, with *Romungro* believing themselves to be superior, and both Vlach and *Romungro* agreeing that Beash Roma occupy the bottom rung of the status ladder (Szuhay, 1995:114). By exploring local usage of these categories, the ambiguity of these terms and the relationship between these



'groups' shall be made clear. After a couple of weeks living in the settlement, I wanted to track down the teenage boy that I had met on my first exploratory trip to the village with the Dignity Foundation monitor. All I knew was his first name and this was not enough for László to be able to identify whom I was referring to. "Is he *Cigány*?" László asked. "Yes. He has a sister with red hair" – unusual and noticeable so I assumed a good method of identification. "Ah, so he's not a *Cigány*", "Yes, his mum was married twice, once to a *Cigány* and once to a *Magyar*" I said, trying to explain that the siblings shared the same mother but had different biological fathers. To this László responded, "Ah, he's not *Cigány*, he's *Romungro*". This usage of this classificatory term and its meaning as understood by László, throws into confusion the neat classificatory system as used by academics. As a Hungarian-speaking *Cigány*, academics would argue that László himself is "*Romungro*". Instead, László identifies someone from both *Magyar* and *Cigány* parentage as being *Romungro*. Another friend with a *Magyar* father and *Cigány* mother described himself as "mixed" (*keverék*). He would proudly explain that his skin colour was burnished brown from working outdoors under the sun. Under his clothes he was as white as me, he would claim, showing the sun-tan mark where his vest top had protected his skin.

Talking about *Cigánys* in Hungary, a politically aware Romany *bácsi* (old man) spoke of the enduring nature of *Cigány* culture. He referred to Vlach and Beash as sharing attributes with all *Cigánys*: all groups (*csoport*) share similarities in their lifestyles. "You can walk into a house and you know immediately if it is a Gypsy household from just the living room – and we all do the same things at funerals, for instance". Characteristic features of the living rooms, or living spaces (as frequently these rooms doubled as bedrooms), are: brightly coloured fake flowers, floral decorations attached to the walls, empty beer cans, deodorants, plates and glasses arranged as decorations, colourfully painted interior walls and stylized pictures and photos of loved ones. Later, László made a crucial point in saying that it did matter which group you belonged to as to the outside world everyone is categorized as "*Cigány*". Building on this point, and exploring the discrimination that *Cigánys* face, the *bácsi* (old man) expounded his belief that it was every Rom's responsibility to counter the claims that *Cigánys* are dirty by always being well-dressed and clean-shaven with short hair. Language as a dividing line was not commented on by the *bácsi* (old man). Indeed, during my fieldwork there



were few references to speaking Romany. Irma once said with pride that no-one in the village knew Romany. She boasted that her grandmother had been able to speak Romany, but now no-one in the village could. When it was suggested that Romany be taught in the local school, people would bristle and shoot down the idea. Not speaking Romany was seen to enhance integration into Hungarian society.

Other than this *bácsi*'s (old man) speech, I only heard reference to Beash and Vlach on a couple of occasions. At the leaving party for a family (mother, father and two daughters (*család*)) going to Canada a group of children were joking around and teasing each other. "You are from Romania!", insulted one boy. Retaliating, the boy accused his friend of being Beash. This exchange was overheard by adults and who told the children to be quiet. On another occasion, walking the last stretch of road home bare-footed as my shoes had caused a painful blister, friends warmly shouted out from their roadside positions that I had now become a true *Cigány*. László and Melinda's son, however, met me on the road and told me angrily that I looked like a Beash, before running home in advance of me to tell his parents what an unsightly spectacle I was making of myself. In the first instance '*Cigány*' had been used to appreciate my behaviour, while in the second a negative connotation was evoked.

Above are illustrations of the ambiguity of the categories *Romungro*, Beash and Vlach, which allow insight into the *Romungro*'s concept of themselves. Similar subtle shades of ambiguity exist in the division of the world into '*Magyar*' and '*Cigány*'. Within the settlement, *Cigánys* often run down other *Cigánys* and, in doing so, express a desire to graduate from settlement life. In the following section, I shall explore how being *Cigány* is not always about deep pride and loyalty. For example, Katalin is proud that the Rác's family branch trait is to "follow the *Magyars*" and proudly claims to live *outside* the settlement. A Rác through marriage she expounded on her theory that, while there were close relations between the Rác, Mezei and Balogh family branches, each family branch had definable characteristics.<sup>56</sup> According to her, the Rác "go after" the *Magyars*. They are ruthless and ambitious, said Katalin with a great deal of pride.

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<sup>56</sup> For a similar discussion of the traits of family branches, see Horváth (forthcoming). Although, in contrast to Horváth's account, this was the only occasion that family branches were attributed with personality traits.



“That is why we are entrepreneurs”. She illustrated this claim with examples of Rácz enterprises. She and her husband, living in the Romany settlement, had set their first ambition to be moving out of the settlement. Once this was achieved, with the purchasing of a plot of land outside the boundaries of the settlement on which a large house was built, their next ambition was to buy a car. This too was achieved, and so it continued, deciding on specific ambitions and working towards fulfilling them. Her deceased husband’s brother lived on the main road running through the village, way out of the settlement. This close family (*család*) was very successful, owning the local disco (from which Roma were banned) and a large area (60 hectares) of cane land, and reflected well on the wider extended family (*testvér*) and the Rácz family branch. “You see, where the *Magyars* go, we follow. The Balogh just stay where they are though”. The Rácz want to show that while being *Cigány* they are just as good as the *Magyars*. And they show this through financial success. Katalin claims that lifestyles of these two family branches are therefore very different, with one embodying the ideals and values of the *Magyars* in an attempt to prove their worth, while the other remains satisfied in their lowlier position. This is interesting as Katalin spoke on another occasion of extended family (*testvér*) “earning respect”, begging the question: how does family *earn* respect? It would seem that in Katalin’s estimations, an extended family (*testvér*) that belongs to a family branch known for successfully going after the *Magyars*, deserves respect.

In a similar vein, on several occasions different people expressed a desire to move out of the settlement. “I want to move out of here, away from all these *Cigánys*”, people would declare. Barbara spoke of her friends in “the village” (as opposed to the settlement), claiming that she chose to not befriend the settlement inhabitants. In fact, her days were, other than occasional trips to the local doctor’s surgery, confined to the settlement, and her only friends were her husband’s close family (*család*) and acquaintances she spoke to on the street. “No wonder the Mayor doesn’t like the *Cigánys* as he gives them their benefits only to see them go to the pub and spend it on drink”, a young Romany man commented as we talked about the Epervár *Cigánys*. Disagreeing with this statement, as I had never seen such behaviour, the young man immediately retracted his words, “Yes, there are good



*Cigánys* too”.<sup>57</sup> *Cigánys* speaking disparagingly about *Cigánys* is not unusual. A similar attitude towards fellow Roma is recorded by Stewart (1997:chapter 5), yet unlike in Harangos where serious ambition and circumstances allowed certain people to realize their dreams (in 1986, since then many things are sure to have changed) few Epervár Roma had any real intention to leave the settlement. The households of close family (*család*) and networks of extended family (*testvér*) formed a close-knit community that was fun and safe to be a part of. In the following section the ambiguities of the association with being *Cigány* will become clearer as we explore the categories that define one’s status as *Cigány*.

There is a separate small settlement consisting of five Romany households neighbouring and facing each other on a street some distance from the main *Cigány* settlement. Living in a *Magyar*-dominated part of the village here the residents, in houses similar to those in the *Cigány* settlement, are very ambiguous about their status as *Cigány*. Poorly dressed and ill-looking, with a band of dogs roaming the vicinity, these few houses are easily discernible to the observer as *Cigány* households. I only discovered this settlement’s existence near the end of my stay in the village, at which point I went to speak to the inhabitants. I shall expand on the episode that I referred to in the first chapter, the reception I received to my initial questioning, to show the relationship between the two settlements. This story also sheds light on these Romany inhabitants’ attitude to the *Cigány* category. Expecting the immediate hospitality I had grown accustomed to, I proceeded to explain, through the fencing of one of the houses where I knew relatives of my friends in the main settlement lived, that I was interested in writing a Mezei family tree. However, my initial attempt at introducing myself and the purpose of my visit was greeted with great hostility. Contrary to what I had assumed, just as I had not known of this settlement’s existence, these people did not know who I was and did not welcome my probing into their lives. My references to *Cigánys* and family trees provoked a hostile and aggressive reaction from the two women I was speaking to. “We are *Cigánys*. How do you know? Because we have a big G on our passports” and “There are loads of Mezei in the village, it is not just a *Cigány* name”. Upon discovering that I was an English girl,

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<sup>57</sup> One of the few Epervár Roma to express a more benevolent view of the Mayor. This can be explained by his family’s (*család*) relationship to the local authorities. As the son of the leader of the Dignity Foundation-supported pallet factory, he enjoys good and profitable relations with the *Magyar* Mayor. This short dialogue shows his continued commitment to his fellow *Cigány*, who he ends up supporting.



living in the *Cigány* settlement (they had heard rumours of me, but that was all), I was welcomed into the house and made to feel totally at ease.<sup>58</sup> We sat and talked, a neighbour and her children entered the house and joined in, I was offered food and drink and once again found myself totally included in the household atmosphere. Sitting under a brightly painted tropical outdoor scene on basic plastic benches in the bare, communal living space, drinking coke from the only glass while family (*család*) members utilized ice-cream tubs and jam jars for their drinks, watching the youthful grandmother, back from a day collecting onions, kissing and petting her grandchildren, I was again in that familiar setting that I had grown to associate with *Cigány* households.

A twenty-seven-year-old resident, born in this small settlement, has never been into the main *Cigány* settlement. An older lady was born in the *Cigány* settlement, but had moved away when her parents died to bring up her children in this area, away from the bad influence of the other sort of *Cigány*. To have moved away from the *Cigány* settlement to this area was seen as a positive step and an attempt at disassociation from being *Cigány*. "We are not seen as *Cigány*". They believe that those in the *Cigány* settlement are "loud" and "thieving", while they themselves are "working" (*szorgos*) Roma. A fifteen-year-old young lady who had visited the *Cigány* settlement as a friend from school lived there, expressed a desire to move to the main settlement, but her fiancé, a Rom from the area, did not want to move. The inhabitants of this area had chosen to isolate themselves from the *Cigány* settlement. They did not go to the *Cigány* Balls, nor did they marry inhabitants of the *Cigány* settlement, rather finding either *Cigány* or *Magyar* partners from their own neighbourhood (see Káminski, 1980). They worked for the Romany entrepreneurs from the main settlement, but did so in their own small and exclusive close family (*család*) groups. News of the *Cigány* settlement reached them through the *Magyars* who find the stories and news of happenings in the *Cigány* settlement entertaining, and pass them onto their neighbours. The inhabitants of this small settlement expressed an ambiguous relationship with the category *Cigány*. They attempted to distance themselves from the negative attributes of the ethnic group and, like Katalin, by emphasising their positive qualities, position themselves as quasi-*Magyars*.

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<sup>58</sup> "You've got a funny accent". This observation instigated my necessary, basic introduction that broke the communication barrier.



However much the Epervár Roma express the desire to be recognized as sharing *Magyar* characteristics, not a single *Cigány* I spoke to would ever want to be labelled a *Magyar*. While the above examples illustrate that certain characteristics are associated with the category *Magyar*, most often the term is used simply as a method of identification.<sup>59</sup> On occasion, the term is used ironically to reinforce the perceived absoluteness of the *Magyar-Cigány* divide. One day, standing out in a large group talking, a passing Romany woman was pointed at in jest, “She’s *Magyar!*”. To this tease the small crowd laughed and the tired-looking woman, wearily walking home with her bags of shopping, smiled in recognition of the joke. The humour lay in this woman’s total disassociation from the *Magyar* community. Struggling home with her shopping bags, returning to her small house nestling next to the cane land, this haggard-looking woman was the world weary *Cigány* woman. Born, bred and raised a *Cigány*, her life and extended family (*testvér*) were in the settlement – and she faced the associated struggles.<sup>60</sup>

At a name day party a group of four children were dancing to music, moving with grace, style, rhythm and self-confidence. Just like at the *Cigány* balls, where both males and females moved with real panache and style to the mainstream *Magyar* and Romany music, these children were absorbing and interpreting the beats in a mesmerizing manner.<sup>61</sup> “This is how the *Magyars* dance”, the older girl proclaimed as she lowered her arms, changed her rhythm and staggered her moves in a perfect imitation of *Magyar* dancing. The contrast was immediate, and her mimicry was impressively accurate. This was one of the few occasions ‘*Magyars*’ were singled out and ridiculed – and only slightly. This attitude towards non-*Cigánys* is very different to the situation recorded in other ethnographic accounts, in which Roma set themselves up in direct and hostile opposition to non-*Cigánys* (Stewart, 1997:204-231; Gay Y Blasco, 1999a:61-131).

The term *Magyar* is most often used to mean ‘Other’, as the evidence below shall illustrate. After reading ethnographies about Romany cultures I was prepared for

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<sup>59</sup> Unlike among the *Gitano* of Jarana (Gay Y Blasco, 1999a:17) where ‘*Payo*’ meaning non-*Cigány* is an insult.

<sup>60</sup> This lady was in fact married to the Róbert, the man who later embarked on an affair with thirteen-year-old Lívi.

<sup>61</sup> Okely, building on the work of others, makes the comment that “Gypsies dancing to a gajo tune, yet on their own terms, symbolizes exactly the Gypsies social and cultural predicament ... The Gypsies subvert the dominant form in their own way” (1997:197).



being labelled 'Gadjo', a pejorative term applied to non-Roma.<sup>62</sup> Yet, as I slowly discovered, instead of 'Gadjo', '*Magyar*' was the term used to describe all those people that were not *Cigány*. '*Magyar*' seemed to represent 'the Other', replacing Gadjo as a term to be applied to non-Roma. During my stay in the village, I only heard the word 'Gadjo' on two occasions. One of these was László recounting the story to friends of a rival hamstering team aggressively questioning his rights to land, in which he referred to the men as Gadjo. The other occasion was an illuminating dialogue between myself and a friend that I turn to now. During my time in the settlement, I was asked on several occasions whether I was "*Cigány* or *Magyar*". Each time I felt exasperated, "I am neither, I am English". "No, but are you *Cigány* English or *Magyar* English?" I never knew how to respond and felt that the questioner had no concept of what a foreigner was. Still, it left me puzzled, especially as this exchange took place on more than one occasion. One such time, I was asked out on the streets by a group of curious children, if I was *Magyar* English or *Cigány* English. Listening to my insistent reply that I was neither, an older lady interrupted, calling over she said, "She [me] doesn't understand". At this point I still thought that no it was *they* that didn't understand. (How anthropological!!) The breakthrough for me came when a *Cigány* friend of mine from Romania, but temporarily living and working in Epervár, in a low key wooing effort told me how he had been out with a *Magyar* before. "Yes, but I am not *Magyar*", I repeated. "Well, Gadjo then, that's what we call it". And then I understood. *Magyar* was simply the other – and everywhere there was us (the *Cigánys*) and *Magyars* (the non-*Cigánys*). This young man lived in a Romanian village where the Romany community sounded very strong. We would sit outside in the spring evenings and he would tell me about life in his Transylvanian village. With only the croaking frogs as our music in Epervár, I would be told of how at this time in the evening at his home there would be men out on benches by their houses playing guitars and singing. Every week there were discos on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. The contrasting quietness of Epervár was alien and boring for him. So, this Hungarian-Romanian-*Cigány* helped me understand and grasp what so many people had been curious about: was I one of them, or not?

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<sup>62</sup> According to Silverman, who worked with Romanes-speaking North American Roma, Gazhe (Gadjo) means "non-Gypsies, by implication, nonpeople or subpeople" (1988:262).



Another close family (*család*), also from Romania and living in Epervár, described a depressing side to the multi-stranded identity as experienced by ethnic *Cigánys* who live in Transylvania and for whom Hungarian is their mother tongue: an absence of home. Life for this family (*család*) had been unbearable in Romania as they had been subject to discrimination due to being Hungarian in Romania and for being *Cigány*. Desperate to improve their quality of life they moved to Hungary. In Hungary, however, they suffer discrimination for being Romanian and *Cigány*. The female head of household described herself and her close family as “*hazátlan*”, meaning “homeless, displaced, exiled”. The family (*család*) moved specifically to Epervár as a friend was able to temporarily give them his house, and where Katalin’s husband offered work at his Epervár *presszó* (drinking and cake eating establishment) to the male head of household, Tibor, a talented musician. However, the *presszó* was forced to close due to too many fights erupting in it and Tibor, able to play a range of instruments and after having played in restaurants since a boy, was unable to find other work as he lacked a Hungarian musician’s permit. Working without a permit would put him at risk of being deported from Hungary, so he has had to give up his music. Instead he does casual agricultural work: cane work, hamstering, harvesting.

The family (*család*) lives in this no-man’s land, in a state of perpetual homelessness. Every month they must travel to the border to have their passport stamped to give them permission to remain in Hungary. The eighty-one-year-old mother had just left for the border when we met and the trip was costing a total of 3,000 HUF. In comparison, 200,000 HUF is needed for permanent Hungarian papers which includes the cost of doctor papers, official translations, etc. Tibor and his wife were very annoyed that they are unable to secure these permanent papers for their children. They are too expensive and the authorities simply refuse to give them to this family (*család*). “They give the papers to foreigners, to Chinese, in two days”, they complained. The wife’s little sister has lived for the past fifteen years in Canada and sends money to cover the cost of the younger son’s education and the family’s visas. The elder son’s wife spent the year that I was in the village living and working in Canada with members of her extended family (*testvér*), while the husband stayed in the village, working in the autumn at the freezing factory with his brother who spent evenings at classes in Debrecen. With this support system, perhaps the younger generation would be able to

permanently settle and enjoy a higher quality of life, but now continue to live on the edge of the system. Talking to Tibor about his sons' freezing factory work placement I asked if it was dangerous in terms of the authorities discovering that they were working without proper permits, "Of course!" he replied ("*Dehogynem!*").<sup>63</sup>

Further ambiguity of identity arises from the fact that Hungarian Roma are both Hungarian citizens and members of the Romany ethnic minority. "We are not *Cigánys*: we are Hungarian (*magyar*). We are Hungarian citizens (*magyar álampolgár*)" a woman shouted out to me as I explained why I was in the village to a curious group of female extended family (*testvér*) whom I often passed on one of the streets. This was the first instance of the concept of *Cigány* as a legitimate area of research being queried by the inhabitants of the settlement. Pressed on this point the group agreed, with a degree of reluctance, that indeed they were Hungarian citizens. This theme of citizenship and identity was raised by the census interviews that took place in 2000. In answer to the question on ethnicity most people I spoke to had answered "Roma", but there were a couple of instances of people 'denying' their ethnicity: '*Cigánys*' answering '*Magyar*' to this question. One of these people was a woman in the smaller *Cigány* settlement who said that as she could speak only Hungarian and no Romany language she was *Magyar*. The woman who lived in a large house outside the settlement, where the local disco was held (from which Roma are banned), also answered that she was *Magyar*. Both these women are sisters of inhabitants of the main *Cigány* settlement. Similarly, Melinda expressed her identity as a *Magyar* citizen when she displayed a pride and a civic concern for a statue in the town of Szilvaszék. There is, among the Epervár Romany community, a real sense of pride for the spa town of Szilvaszék. Epervár settlement inhabitants would talk of how beautiful it was in the summer. Seeing teenagers skate boarding on the foot of a war memorial statue in one of the public parks angered and disgusted Melinda who deemed it totally inappropriate for the monument to be used in this way.

My status in the settlement, touched on previously when I reflected on the questioning of whether I was English *Magyar* or English *Cigány*, further

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<sup>63</sup> For other case studies of both Romanians working in Hungary and Hungarian Roma working in Canada, refer to articles by Kováts (2002), Vajda and Prónai (2002) and Hajnal (2002).



illuminates the permeability of the boundaries and the associated traits. As I mentioned in the first chapter, on a few occasions, sometimes in semi-jest and most often in an atmosphere of kindness, I was told that I was *Cigány*. While the context and reason for these comments may be ambiguous, the fact that I was only told these things in a kind and inclusive way, is important. The stereotype that I was a dirty *Cigány* or a thieving *Cigány* was never uttered, instead I was a *Cigány* for cleaning the floor with a mop, or stuffing cabbage leaves or when I got a sun tan, "You were too white before". "You look *Cigány* – you are going to go home wearing a long red skirt!" Dávid laughed: deliberately turning that particular stereotype on its head and playing with a popular image of *Cigány* that is far removed from the experiences of Epervár Roma. Sitting on the grass outside a house, talking to the household, having refused offers of a tree stump to sit on, it was commented how like a *Cigány* I had become: cycling, walking around, chatting, going to the shop. I was told that I would be missed as everyone had got used to me (*megszokni*). On another occasion, mopping the floor at a friend's house as we prepared for a party, I was said to be a "*Cigány* woman", *Cigány asszony*. While out hoeing I was told I held the hoe, "not like a *Magyar*, but like a *Cigány*". These things were told to me to make me feel good. It was anticipated that I would be pleased to be showing the attributes that make a person *Cigány*. This is interesting in so far as while it was common knowledge among friends that I was living in the settlement in order to observe the life of that particular community of *Cigánys*, so that I could write a paper and obtain a university qualification, I had made no comment about wanting to become a member of the community itself.<sup>64</sup> Yet, the settlement inhabitants clearly wanted to include me so that I became a member of the community, and believed that I would be happy to become a member of their community. I was encouraged to dress and act like a *Cigány*, while my idiosyncrasies, such as cycling as a female, were also protected.

The other side to my position in the village was that, despite my inclusion into the *Cigány* community, I was *Magyar* and thus had access to a world barred to

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<sup>64</sup> Although, time and again I was surprised at people's own explanations for my presence in the settlement. While I had assumed that the purpose of my stay would have spread throughout the community, I found that the rumour that I had come to the village to look for a husband was more attractive. On hearing that I was in fact going to write a book about settlement life, one *néni* (old woman) took fright, "No, then they will come here and kill us all!" A younger relative calmly explained my more benign intentions to show people in England that *Cigánys* do want to work. After calming down she gestured outside, "Yes, after living here with us you have seen that".



*Cigánys*. One evening, following Zoltán's musical performance in a restaurant in Szilvaszék, I urged my *Cigány* companions to go into a particular nightclub. My *Magyar* friend, one of the few *Magyars* I befriended during my fieldwork, had gone into that club and I was eager to join him.<sup>65</sup> Sitting in the car on one of the main streets, my Romany friends were unenthusiastic about going in. Much to my frustration (a night out of the village was a rare event), they seemed to prefer to hang around the car, talking and listening to the radio. After much incessant urging on my part, Róbert tersely explained that I could go in if I wanted, being *Magyar*, but that they could not.<sup>66</sup> Earlier in the evening a Epervár father had left his son and his group of friends sitting on a low wall on the busy main Szilvaszék street filled with outdoor bars. "Do you have your IDs? No, well get in somewhere soon". These young men – friendly and kind and ready for a relaxed evening out in this heavily-populated tourist area had to consider the potential problems arising from their ethnicity. Not being a victim of prejudice, not having to consider or restrict my actions or movements because of the realities of discrimination, meant that I would never really be *Cigány*. My lack of *Magyar* friends in the village and my ignorance of the daily lives of rural *Magyars* are indicators of the *Cigány-Magyar* divide, but whereas I could step into any *Magyar* establishment or institution and be accepted, my *Cigány* counterparts could not.

I postulate that as a counter to this hostility beyond the settlement boundaries, the Roma encourage an inclusive, warm and open environment in the settlement. The over-whelming feeling on the streets and when visiting houses is one of amicable friendship. There is a definite sense that the settlement is a bounded entity in which inhabitants are safe, with the association that the world outside the settlement is dangerous (see Stewart, 1997:87). It is because of the guarded nature of the settlement territory that on all my exploratory visits to Romany settlements, in all different regions of Hungary, someone would always approach and ask, in a defensive manner, "Who are you looking for?" László once spoke of how if a stranger wanders into the Epervár settlement this question would be directed at

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<sup>65</sup> This *Magyar* young man is András's neighbour. Despite this *Magyar*'s ambiguous relationship with *Cigánys* (he claimed to have had his front teeth punched out by local Roma), he had a close friendship with András.

<sup>66</sup> This practice is not restricted to local discos in the Szilvaszék region. As the Human Rights Watch reported, in 1996 the nightclub of the prominent Economics University in Budapest has a policy of turning away Roma at the door (Helsinki Watch, 1996:102). NEKI's White Booklet 2000 charts a similar case of discrimination with *Cigánys* being denied access to a local disco (2000:47).



them, thus helping to create a defended community. In fact, this was how I met László as it had been he who had asked me whom I was looking for, why I was in the settlement, on my first visit without the Dignity Foundation monitor. While it was the perception among the Romany settlement inhabitants that *Magyars* did not enter the settlement, in fact a number of non-Roma were regular visitors to the settlement: László's *Magyar* best friend,<sup>67</sup> the *Magyar* post woman (a much respected and liked lady who was often stopped as she cycled through the settlement delivering post by people eagerly enquiring if they had any letters that day) and the dustbin collectors, to name a few.

On one of my first days in the village I explained my research to a couple of young people. Showing them my field notes, I asked how they felt about this, if it was acceptable. "Of course, if it wasn't we'd have sent you away by now". Just as when, speaking to the women in the smaller *Cigány* settlement, I was greeted with hostility and suspicion to my unexpected questioning about their *Cigány* heritage. The settlement, in this way, is a guarded territory. The reaction to my relationship with a Szilvaszék policeman is a scenario that shows how these dynamics work. Having had to apply for a temporary residency visa from the Szilvaszék police station the policeman who had processed my application took the opportunity of meeting a native English speaker to arrange for English lessons for himself. One Sunday morning he came to my house for the first lesson, as arranged. Within moments László interrupted. His coming into my house was in no way unusual, but his manner, facial expressions and voice were noticeable in their hostility. He introduced himself to the policeman and explained his relationship to me, exuding contempt for the visitor. This turned out to be our first and only lesson. Days later a *bácsi* (old man) visited and explained that police were not welcome in the settlement, that all disputes are sorted out internally and my having a policeman as a guest would encourage rumours that I was a spy. In the following days, others in the settlement stopped and asked me who had been my visitor, or called out that they heard I had a policeman friend. Of course, a policeman, from the point of view of the Roma, is one of the worst people to have entered the settlement, and

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<sup>67</sup> László referred to their different ethnicity often: how they were best friends from childhood, playing football together as boys and then riding motorbikes together as young men, and that now his friend was equally as poor and unable to find work as the *Cigány* villagers.

the community reacted appropriately.<sup>68</sup> While in private László said to me that I was welcome to have any guest of my choosing, he had the freedom to say so because pressure was being put on me from other members of the community. László was able to retain his special relationship with me as my protector, advisor and provider of unconditional support, in the knowledge that and because of the fact that the community was making it quite clear that such a guest was not acceptable.

Yet, once within the community, once one belongs, the kindness, warmth and acceptance distributed is heart warming. I was struck by the “warmth of personal relationships” (Szuhay, 1995:112, quoting Kemény). As I shall explain, this ‘warmth’ is created and maintained through specific rules. On one of my first days in the village I thanked Melinda for a coffee that she had made me. “Here, in the *Cigány* settlement, we don’t say ‘thank you’. Neither do we knock on doors in the settlement. If a door is locked you must knock, but if not you just walk in”, explained László. Again and again these ‘rules’ were reinforced through everyone’s behaviour within the settlement. Doors were generally left unlocked and open. László said that such behaviour was not confined to the Epervár but, having lived in Budapest for over a decade, was common practice among the Budapest *Cigánys* too. These rules were generally unspoken. Thanking people was not necessary, expected or wanted, doors were left open for visitors to wander in through and “Hello!” (“*Szia!*”) was never said. Instead people would walk in through the open door of houses and stand or sit in the common area, sometimes with news or a proposition, but often just calmly involving themselves in the conversation that was going on. People would wander in and out with no comment from any of the people in the room. In this way a fluid and open environment was created.

To appreciate this atmosphere in the settlement, it is essential to be aware of the attitude that everyone is equal. There are other patterns of behaviour that I consider examples of this ethos:

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<sup>68</sup> Local Epervár police paid a visit to László (as a matter of course) on hearing that I was living as his neighbour/under his protection in the village. Laszlo, Melinda, their son and I had all been outside. When the police car drew up László ordered us all inside, and we scampered indoors as if taking cover, while László stepped forward to confront the police and protect us from them.



An old woman (*néni*) is unable to speak so communicates by making clicking noises from the back of her throat. Despite the novelty of this form of communication it is possible to understand her from the intonation of her clicks. Everyone spoke and communicated with this lady. On one occasion Melinda's son, a renowned trouble maker, had been told off by this lady who relied on clicking to communicate. Children were rarely chastised by other parents, so her doing this must have been justified. Back at home Melinda's son made fun of the woman, impersonating her wagging her finger and clicking angrily at him. Only making a mandatory, half-hearted attempt to hide her amusement, Melinda told her son off for making fun of this woman in this way. In the same way, no-one made fun of the local homosexual. The local hairdresser, a rather camp, homosexual man was never mocked in a malicious way. His nickname played on his sexuality, but everyone within the community was comfortable with his sexuality, despite mainstream Hungarian society's rather less accepting attitude towards homosexuality.<sup>69</sup>

This accepting and caring attitude extended to disabled people. There were several mentally disabled people who had to be placed in care home due to the nature of their illnesses, but if at all possible, such people were cared for at home in the settlement. A mentally and physically disabled young man was encouraged to enjoy himself, boisterously playing around and joining in the outdoor activities and conversations of the youth, while all the time his condition would be closely monitored by his companions. Playing football in the garden of a house to which he lived opposite, the game was drawn to an end by the watching female head of the household before the young man became over-excited and hurt himself. His statements and insights, when unintentionally funny, were laughed at in an open and inclusive way. "Fool" (*bolond*) was a term thrown around the community frequently. Rather than being a real insult like "crooked" (*zsivány*), it was a jokey, affectionate insult. Boys laughing around would dismiss a friend who told silly, juvenile jokes as a "fool". Stupid statements and poor quality jokes were indicators of the speaker's foolishness. With exchanges full of jokes and comments and laughter, fools were in great supply in Epervár! This same term was also affectionately applied to mentally ill people. In the case of the young

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<sup>69</sup> This approach contrasts to the Spanish *Gitano* of Jarana for whom homosexuality is a feature of only non-Romany society and so is not even considered by the Gypsies (Gay Y Blasco, 1999a:70).



man described above, his statements were laughed over and he himself was said to be a “fool” (*bolond*). There were other members of the community who were mentally ill. One, a five-year-old boy was treated as an equal member of the family (*család*) – running around and joining in with the other children.<sup>70</sup> Playing outdoors one day it was said that the ill child had grabbed Melinda's son, who had retaliated by punching the boy in the stomach, badly wounding him, and leaving him gasping for breath. The ferocity of this attack had angered the boy's grandmother who told Melinda's son off. I heard this story from both Melinda's son and the grandmother of the ill child. In re-telling the story Melinda's son emphasized that he had been hurt first, while the grandmother used my friendship with both families to deliver a message. Telling her version of events, she explained that it had been necessary for her to intervene and shout at Melinda's son as he had badly hurt her grandson who was sick, and who therefore could not be treated in that way. The atmosphere in Melinda's home was that it had not been acceptable for the grandmother of the ill child to shout at Melinda's son as she had done. Another man, who temporarily stayed in the settlement on a couple of occasions, once with István and the other time with Irma, was mentally sick too. He was a huge person, fat and tall. László referred to him as “a little foolish”, but re-assured me that he would do no harm. Others laughed that I should be careful, the “fool” was known to be living on the street and I was warned that he would hurt me – again these warnings were delivered in a jokey manner.

Visitors into homes are always urged to eat (*Egyél!*) and drink (*Igyál!*). Visitors are always offered food in a very insistent manner and the offer is nearly always politely refused. An exchange takes place in which the host will insist “Eat!” (*Egyél!*), and the guest responds “No, I have just eaten. Really, no, I just ate at home” or “No, I am just returning home to eat now”. The respondent's refusal must be just as enforced as the offer for food. The end result is that the hospitality of the host has been exemplary as food was offered to the visitor, yet in fact no loss occurred to the host (food is itself a precious resource and resources of time, effort and money are used in its preparation).<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Photographing the five-year-old son and the one-year-old son on the occasion of the youngest's birthday, the mother refused to be photographed at all, saying that it would be unfair on the elder as she had never been photographed with him as a baby.

<sup>71</sup> The sharing of food had a many sided social function in the community (as explored by Carsten, 1997). Offering of food was a deliberate sign of hospitality, (Returning from my first visit to Károly's sister (with whom he had no longer had any personal relationship)



Singing on the bus home and while working, joking in the early morning on the way to work and again after a tiring day of physical labour,<sup>72</sup> playing music loudly as the house is cleaned and washing hung out doors, are all features of life that help create a relaxed atmosphere in the community. This atmosphere permeates daily life, but there is a more complex side to this communal environment. There is a warmth to personal relationships, but it is targeted towards certain people in certain situations. As relatedness is explained in greater detail in the following chapter, for now it is suffice to say that a visitor can only walk into houses of relatives without knocking, otherwise the guest must call loudly from the street. Food must be offered to visitors, but visitors are normally only ever extended family (*testvér*) members. Extended family (*testvér*) relationships influence every area of Epervár life so that what appears at first to be a spirit of comradeship and warmth of emotions is rooted in specific rules concerning relationships between certain people.

### 3 Themes

I now turn to specific themes associated with being *Cigány*. As explained earlier, these themes recur within the community as expressions of being *Cigány*. As shall become clear, these are far from straight-forward identity markers, but part of a complex process of identification and self-awareness.

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Károly half-questioned, "But she didn't offer you any food, did she?" In fact, his sister had shown the high level of hospitality that I had come to take for granted, offering me food and drink.), but I argue that the acceptance of the offer of food often carried meanings beyond a simple return of goodwill. For instance, Melinda and László listed which houses I was allowed to eat at (based on hygiene according to them, but ruling out a household they had argued with and including all their family (*testvér*)). Eating at houses became, in this way, a contentious issue. Offering food was a display of hospitality and showed that guests were welcome, but the acceptance of the offer of food had a great many social implications. Gropper wrote of U.S. *Cigánys* that, "sharing a meal together is a sign of trust and friendship" (1975:51). A similar conclusion may be drawn in the Epervár context. An extreme illustration is that of András, on hearing that his neighbour, rather than his mother as he had assumed, had cooked the food he was eating, spat out what he had been chewing.

<sup>72</sup> Kertész-Wilkinson explains this joviality while working as "in keeping with the Roma tradition of not separating work and enjoyment" (1997:101). In Chapter Four I suggest, in line with Horváth (forthcoming), that such behaviour is about claiming and controlling the workplace.



### 3.1 Skin Colour

Skin colour as a topic was one of the pre-occupations of individuals in the community and was raised several times in relation to being *Cigány*, beauty and indicator of character. Romany people have skin that is a variety of shades and tones: with an assortment of eye colours, heights and weights to match. Many do have dark brown skin and black hair, an appearance that fuels the hypothesis that the Roma of central and eastern Europe originally emigrated from India.<sup>73</sup> To be *Cigány* is a far from simple concept, as this whole thesis and this chapter in particular addresses, but is repeatedly reduced to skin colour by the Epervár Romany people. This is, to a great extent, because dark skin colour is seen to be an indicator to *Magyars* of *Cigány* identity and is thus perceived to be the basis for discrimination. Entertaining his family (*család*) and teasing his friend, András told the story of how he was with this dark-complexioned *Magyar* friend at the Szilvaszék swimming pool and the friend was teased for being *Cigány*, while András was ignored. This tale was told to be laughed at, a light-hearted joke, the sinister side shrugged off in the telling. Katalin, her close family (*család*), and Melinda speak proudly of their fair complexions. They believe that *Magyars* cannot tell that they are *Cigány* because they are so light-skinned. Katalin believes that her fair complexion is an essential quality that allows her to pass effectively into mainstream, *Magyar* society.<sup>74</sup> Along with style of dressing, talking and interacting, Katalin sees skin colour as an essential aspect of her ability to do business with non-Roma. Katalin explained Melinda's refusal to go out hoeing as Melinda not wanting to be out working under the sun, not wanting her skin to go brown. Fair skin is therefore valued.

Dark skin is presented to be an indicator of questionable morals. I was told to be careful of the "brown boys" (*barna fiuk*). One friend, András, warned me of befriending a young man from another village (whom he regarded as his rival) as his skin was "too brown" (*tul barna*). András was claiming that not only was the brown skin ugly, but that it implied that this young man was untrustworthy. Similarly, while Mihály's complexion - fair hair and blue eyes - would be pointed out by both himself and his mother with a sense of pride ("The darkness of my skin is from working outside" he would proudly inform. His mother would

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<sup>73</sup> For a comprehensive and critical overview of this hypothesis refer to Fraser (1995), Okely (1983 and 1984) and Matras (2002).

<sup>74</sup> The implications of this for Katalin's business strategies are described in Chapter Four.



sometimes ask for confirmation “He doesn’t look like a *Cigány*, does he?”), I was warned of his womanizing by a mutual male friend, with the words, “He may not look like a *Cigány* with his pale complexion, but he is”.

However there is a great ambiguity about this attitude to skin colour and the preference for white skin. I developed a tan over the course of my time in the village, which was noted by Melinda with the comment that I had been “too white” before, “like a *Magyar*”. My legs, rarely exposed to the sun, were said on numerous occasions by different people to be “snow-white” (*hó fehér*). These snow-white legs were seen as an undesirable curiosity. László encouraged me to go into the cane area, where people rarely went, undress and sunbathe. I was encouraged to develop a dark complexion. In the summer heat, men often circulated round the village bare-chested. Both vanity and practicality explains this: it is very hot and any clothing feels cumbersome, and also the men are proud of their muscular, deeply-tanned upper-bodies. Mihály had spent a day fishing outdoors in a vest top. The skin that had been exposed to the sun was badly burnt, but rubbing cream into this painfully dark red skin, he was pleased with himself. The skin would turn brown, he said, and next time he was out he would wear no top, thus obtaining an even tan. Similarly, after shelling peas outdoors all day, Melinda pointed out her new tan with pride.

Willems and Lucassen quote from Grellman’s eighteenth century text, in which the author explains the physical appearance of *Cigánys* as dark from not washing themselves and smoke from their fires (Willems and Lucassen, 1998). The negative association of dark skin and negative *Cigány* characteristics therefore dates back a long time. *Cigánys* feel discriminated against on sight because of their dark skin: it is seen as a handicap to assimilation, and so to have white skin, to have the ability to ‘pass’, is a valued commodity, hence Katalin’s proud references to András’ and her grandchildren’s white complexions. Dark skin therefore has negative associations, the ‘brown boys’ being the untrustworthy *Cigány* boys, those with all the negative stereotypes attributed to them. Yet concurrently, dark skin, a deep tan, is sought after with whiteness considered unhealthy and undesirable.

Skin colour as an indicator of ethnic affiliation and marginalization created bonds between Épervár *Cigánys* and non-white Brits. Katalin's family (*család*) were interested in life in Britain and would frequently ask questions. One such one was, "Are there *Cigánys* in Britain?" A family member would invariably answer first, "Yes, there are blacks (*fekete*)", and then ask me about the treatment of blacks in Britain, expecting stories concerning racism and ill-treatment. Affinity was felt for this British minority which was known to be discriminated against. In July 2001, while I was in the field, riots broke out among the British-Asian and British-white communities in the English city of Bradford and it was reported on the Hungarian national news. In consequence, I was lectured by my friend Barbara on the equality of people. With great concern she told how people should not be judged according to the colour of their skin, "Just because they are black does not mean that they have AIDS". This empathy and bond with minorities, seems to be a bond with 'the Other'. To an extent, blacks are *Cigány* because they too are the outsiders and the mistreated members of society. This new political awareness can be partially explained by the increased access to information and news that satellite television has allowed.

### **3.2 Being *Cigány* Male: fighting and womanizing**

András told me various colourful stories about his fighting that were intended to create a particular ideal: one of friendship and bravery. Showing me knuckle dusters he explained how he used them in fights. In his stories, he became an actor in scenarios which involved driving to other villages to pick gang fights, coordinating his movements with his friends via mobile telephones. A tale that illuminated his idealized relationship with his brother and their canny and devious street wise ways was the story that once András started a fight and while his opponent went to the police to complain, András' brother punched András so that he could claim that he had been the victim of the attack and merely defended himself. András also claimed to have punched the local dentist when he tried to administer an injection to stop the pain of having his tooth removed. He spoke of his commitment to join his *Cigány* comrades in physical disputes, telling stories of gang fights with local *Magyars*. On one occasion, András claimed that an Épervár *Cigány* young man had been assaulted the night before by a gang of village *Magyar* boys. They had sprayed an aerosol into the young man's face. András was therefore preparing to go out and join the boys from the settlement in



a reprisal attack. It was obvious that the young man in question had indeed been involved in some sort of incident as he had unusually been wearing dark glasses all day. I had been told earlier, however, that the dark glasses were to hide a black eye got from an unrelated dispute (referred to in Chapter Three) involving an ex-girlfriend (Lívi) and her brother. Which story is 'true' is secondary to how different people chose to manipulate the event. As I shall explore in the later chapter, Melinda portrayed the fight to be a critical incident between two extended family (*testvér*) networks, and one that should be respected by showing allegiance to 'our' *testvér* network (Melinda showing allegiance to Lívi and her brother and expecting me to do the same). András, however, told me the *Magyar* versus *Cigány* story, and his reasons for telling me this should be considered. It is possible that the assault victim had told this version to András or perhaps András had invented it for himself, but what is clear is that András used this *Cigány* versus *Magyar* story to tell me about how *Cigány* young men, irrespective of *testvér* loyalties, support one another in physical disputes against *Magyars*. His version involved male bravado and pride in this manly fighting spirit. All these stories, whether 'true' or not, illustrate a specific mind set and are a useful insight into what it means to be *Cigány* for male youth. The banning of Roma from clubs and discos in Epervár itself (and the disco was owned and held in a *Cigány* woman's house) for fighting shows that the disco proprietors share the same outlook of aggressive *Cigánys*.<sup>75</sup>

The reality of male fighting is not so clear. To be well-toned and muscular was a male ideal, and equally important was the self-possessed and self-confident strut. For András, Puff Daddy<sup>76</sup> had an ideal physique and his favourite film was about a young man who learnt martial arts in order to avenge his sibling's death. The film focused heavily on the man's daily struggle to improve his fighting skills and physical physique and fed in to the ideal of manliness as seen by András. The attitude to the *Cigány* balls encapsulates the fear of fighting and the inevitability of it. Young men were afraid of going into the balls as they feared that fights would break out. Some men would sit outside the venue chatting all evening, rather than go in and become involved in a fight. However, at none of the balls did

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<sup>75</sup> The disco was later permanently closed following a *Magyar*-only fight breaking out in the premises.

<sup>76</sup> Now called P Diddy, this black American musician is well-toned and conspicuously displays his wealth and success through his designer labels and gold jewellery.



I see a fight erupt.<sup>77</sup> On one occasion an extremely drunk man tried to pick a fight with a group of old men, but he was immediately restrained by his daughter who took him home. The threat or fear of violence was never realized. Another time there was a loud shouting match on one of the house-lined streets that led into the cane land. Two men, standing about twenty-five metres apart, were shouting at each other in loud, aggressive voices. All the neighbours and curious people from further afield were out watching. Standing in small groups about fifty people were watching and gossiping and enjoying this spectacle and unusual disruption. About ten minutes into the shouting match a policeman drove up, calmed the situation and the crowd dispersed. The argument therefore did not escalate into anything more than a vocal battle.

One evening, sitting outside in András' yard after a night out at one of the *Cigány* Balls, András decided to tell me "what sort of boy" he was (*milyen fiú vagyok*). The story that he told was impressive in its brutality and the magnitude of this incident is unlike the other more light-hearted tales of punching and comradeship. He claimed that a couple of years previously he had been dating three girls at the same time, as was usual, but had one night met one of these girlfriends out at a disco with another boy. She was cheating on András. Incensed, he "switched off" (*kikapcsolni*) and beat up both his girlfriend and the boy with a baseball bat. Both were hospitalized for six days and András was arrested. He claimed that he did not go to prison because of his age. András believes it permissible for a man to react with violence if his girlfriend is found to be two-timing him. In this way, András supported the *Cigány* young man who had beaten up his ex-girlfriend (Lívi) for going to a disco with another man. The ex-boyfriend's reaction was understandable: how else was he to display his anger, authority and re-assert his manliness? András' own story was shocking in so far as it was so removed from the young man I had got to know. Talking to his former girlfriend of two years, such stories of fighting and maltreatment of past girlfriends became even more difficult to believe. She did not verify any of his supposed bullying, beating and fighting. While he claimed to hit former girlfriends for not obeying his orders, such as fetching food or an ashtray for him, there was no supporting evidence. His mother, Katalin, would never have allowed such treatment of women. His former

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<sup>77</sup> Although I was told that there was no ball at Christmas 2002 (when I had left the field) because of a fight at the previous ball in October.



girlfriend claimed that on one occasion their arguing had risen to verge on violence but that Katalin had intervened, calming down the situation. The recurring theme is that the reality, András' real actions, and the impression that he was keen to project are far removed from one another. András was lying to impress and the characteristics and scenarios explored in his stories reveal an idealized version of the *Cigány* male and his relationship to both women and men.

This proudly brutal attitude to women is a trait that many *Cigány* men are proud to boast about. Male household members regularly instruct female members of their close family (*család*), whether wives or daughters or sisters, to fetch a glass of water, cigarettes, lighter, etc. This is another form of asserting their dominance. András' *Magyar* friend, a neighbour, visited one evening. As we sat playing cards, András, in his usual gruff style ordered his little sister to bring him a glass of water. His sister squirmed and made a face, unwilling to obey this charmless order. András repeated it more loudly and more aggressively. "Speak to her normally and maybe she will get it for you" interjected the *Magyar* friend, illuminating a contrasting style of interaction. This is a topic that we return to later in the portrait of the shop.

As well as attempting to appear domineering and aggressive, male *Cigánys* play with the reputation of being womanizers. "He needs a lot of girls" and "He's had as many girls as hair on your head" were phrases often in reference to specific *Cigány* boys. With a couple of people assuming that I had come to the village to look for a husband, I was warned by an elderly and concerned woman to return to my parents to find a husband for myself there as the *Cigány* boys are old hands (*kitanitott*) at using girls. László's thirteen-year-old cousin, Lívi, was being said to be being used (*használt*) by her boyfriend, according to the girl's mother, "There will be a baby soon. He's using her for sex". Tibor's boastings of having dated over a hundred girls seemed to be confirmed as during my time in the village he dated multiple girls at the same time. Through his dating habits he boasted of a preference for *Magyar* girls, claiming to have dated only one *Cigány* girl. This girl was from the settlement and was known to be the one girl who preferred to date *Magyar* men. Therefore when the two began dating their peers teased them constantly: the two *Magyar*-dating *Cigánys* had formed a couple.



### 3.3 Being *Cigány* Female: fashion and beauty

The enduring nature of the perception of beauty that continues to thrive in the Epervár Romany community is fascinating. I argue that this is just not an image, but is an essential value of expressing *Cigány* femininity. Television, film and popular international music are hugely popular forms of entertainment in the settlement and one would imagine that they would influence the tastes of the inhabitants. Waif-like feminine beauty, all the rage in Britain, is equally desirable in Budapest, where the naturally slim, tall *Magyar* women are able to easily exploit this trend. In sharp contrast, the Epervár Roma have a very distinct ideal of female beauty which celebrates curves and fat and a particular style of dress. Romany girls, walking to school in their close-fitting clothes and high platform shoes, long hair framing made up faces, are easily distinguishable from their *Magyar* counterparts.<sup>78</sup> A Romany boy, attending school in Debrecen following his successful matriculation from eighth grade, was talking on the bus home with his fellow, mostly non-Romany, classmates. An attractive girl, dressed in baggy trousers, was pointed out as being pretty. The Romany boy, popular and attractive himself, looked her over and concluded that she was not attractive as she “dressed like a boy”. As a compliment during my mother’s visit to the village, both my mother and I would be flattered by women’s comments that I had put on weight. My mother’s good cooking and care was shown through my increase in weight, while I was to be pleased to have a more robust figure. These attitudes towards body image are perhaps concerned with the concepts of control versus indulgence. The *Cigány* community’s preference and respect for voluptuous beauty is an expression of the community’s celebration of indulgence – of fulfilling one’s desires in the present.

Married women walk a fine line between looking well-groomed and inappropriately dressed. Married women must look good as a public statement that they are in a relationship with a man that cares and provides for them. However, there must be an element of restraint in a married woman’s attire. One young lady, watching her child play out on the street with other children, responded to the compliment from a female friend that she looked unusually good

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<sup>78</sup> Gay Y Blasco makes a similar point in regard to the *Gitano*, “The Gitano ideal of femininity is closer to the 1950s Hollywood images of women – plump, curvy, with big breasts and big buttocks – than to be thin and vaporous visions that populate Western women’s magazines today” (1999a:80).



(in a short, tight-fitting dress, long, loose hair and platform shoes), by explaining that she could dress in this way because her husband was away for the evening. If she were to dress like this in his presence, he would get “jealous”. To further substantiate this observation that marriage necessitated a change in dress to reflect a change in attitude, I shall tell the story of Orsolya. Living with a relative of László’s, Orsolya was a frequent visitor at Melinda’s house. One day her common-law husband returned home with a new ‘wife’ from another village that he had met at a disco, and Orsolya was unceremoniously told to leave. After the move she no longer visited Melinda, but I continued to see her socializing on the street and she looked remarkably different. With dyed, loose hair, make-up, short skirt, and high heels, she was barely recognizable. The statement that she was making through her new look was that she was single again: single and happy.

### **3.4 Dirt and Cleanliness**

The importance of cleanliness was made known to me during one of my first days when I was meticulously taught how to make a bed properly by folding all the sheet corners very exactly and carefully stacking the bedding at one end of the bed. My way of making a bed, which did not follow the method employed by Melinda, was not acceptable. Over the following days, I discovered that nor was my mopping technique, or potato peeling skills up to the standard required. “She doesn’t know how”, women concluded. Indeed, women carried out these household tasks to a very high and particular standard. Mops were expertly manipulated in cleaning the tiled floor of kitchen/living quarters. Everyone was aware of the importance of cleanliness, for example, a twelve-year-old girl once visited and, taking the fruit from the kitchen counter, placed it in one of the cupboards saying, “There, that is tidy now”. Surfaces must be constantly clean and clear. The activity of maintaining a clean and functioning home, done in a specific way, is a demonstrable characteristic of being a “*Cigány asszony*” – a *Cigány* woman. This respect and regard for cleanliness is more than a concern for maintaining hygienic conditions in fairly inhospitable circumstances (poor standard equipment and facilities, children running in and out playing, cooking all day), but is an indicator of the moral standard of the household. A dirty or unkempt household would bring shame upon the occupants.

Stewart (1997:207) writes of a similar introduction into the rules of behaviour concerning matters of cleanliness during his fieldwork. While many of the rules, as I explore below, differ from those enacted by the Epervár Roma, there are similarities. For instance, using separate bowls for the washing of clothes and dishes. However, this distinction does not stretch so far as refusing to use dish towels to dry dishes, nor to the avoidance of baths. In fact, because many homes have washing machines and sinks, the dichotomy is not addressed. "The taboo on washing clothes and dishes together ensured that any dirt from the lower body did not contaminate objects that passed into the mouth. It was for the same reason that Rom avoided baths" (Stewart, 1997:208). It is questionable therefore to what extent the taboo on using separate wash basins for the washing of clothes and dishes is linked to a world view that classes the lower body as pollutive. Throughout my fieldwork I came across no indicators of this view. It is against the recurring theme of pure and impure, Gadjo and *Cigány*, that so dominates *Cigány* ethnographies that I try to address the Epervár Roma's idea of dirt and cleanliness. These themes play a central part in the life of the settlement, being one of the main preoccupations of women's daily lives.

A clean house reflects a clean morality. While never said so directly, the stress placed on maintaining a certain standard of cleanliness was linked to one's character. After visiting a particular house, László asked me if it had been dirty, "I have never been it, I have just heard that it is". The idea of this family (*család*) home being dirty was a suggestion that the inhabitants were morally suspect. The successful entrepreneur, Pál, had, László said, come from a poor household, "His mother used to sleep on the dirt floor". This information was imparted to deride Pál. The poverty and dirt of his background questioned his claims to superiority now. Romanian Gábor, a cousin of András' working in Epervár, spoke of the mother of his new-born baby in disparaging terms. Nobody in either Gábor or András' close families (*család*) wanted the couple to marry as the mother of his child was seen as being beneath Gábor. These feelings were articulated by deriding the young woman through mocking her for apparently sleeping on the ground with the livestock. To suspect someone of coming from a dirty household was therefore an insult. Following the attack on U.S.'s World Trade Centre, the general sentiment in the settlement was that the attack was to be condemned, as was the retaliatory bombing of Afghanistan, with the Roma expressing an



empathy with the innocent, poverty-stricken Afghans. Zoltán believed that Osama Bin Laden should be killed and mimicked a soldier gunning him down. “He lives in a *cave*”, impressed Zoltán, “I saw it on television”, as if these dirty living conditions had a notable influence on the situation. Dirt, a lack of cleanliness, is associated with moral disrepute, how it is manipulated in social relations is further explored in Chapter Three.

A house interior always had to be clean, and with the threat of visitors at any time, this involved constant cleaning. To maintain one’s moral standing it was important that one’s house was seen to be clean by any persons who visited. The attitude towards shared outdoor spaces, however, was not so uniform. “Drop it – this is the *Cigány* settlement” (*Dobj le – ez a Cigány telep!*), I was told as I carried home a sweet wrapper to incredulous questioning from my companions who always dropped their rubbish on the ground (see Okely, 1983:86-87). Children would buy sweets from the shop, eating them as they walked home and throwing the wrappers on the ground. Sometimes household waste was tossed out into the cane land. At times food was thrown into the cane in the knowledge that the dogs and rats would devour it. There were a couple of small, informal dumping areas for discarded objects, but these were infrequently used. For household waste a rubbish collection truck came weekly to the settlement to collect the bags of rubbish that had been left out and the inhabitants of the settlement made full use of this service. Rózsi, who so often gave the impression of struggling to keep her household running, cut a pitiful figure as she stood outdoors, trying to tidy and re-tie the rubbish bags that she had put out earlier for collection after dogs had ripped through the bags in search of food. Barbara spoke negatively of one particular family (*család*) because of the way they disrespectfully dumped rubbish outside, and László often referred to the need to keep outdoor spaces clean. He believed in the importance of keeping a tidy lawn: grass cut short and flowers. László often said how before his amputation he had worked the garden himself, always keeping it in pristine condition. To not be able to attend properly to his homestead was one of the painful aspects of his limited movement. In late summer, he instructed male *testvér* (relations) to clear the small strip of land opposite his house that divided the road from the cane and plant a line of five tree saplings there. Earlier in the year his *Magyar* friend, under László’s instructions, had planted rose bushes in his garden, and both László’s son and I had to undertake the regular watering duties.



The outdoor area was the responsibility of the male household head. The maintenance of a tidy indoor space, by comparison, was the responsibility of the female household head. For most households the state of the yard was unimportant, a secondary concern, but in every case the indoor area was revered. How one chose to cultivate and maintain one's own garden and the surrounding communal space was personal and standards and attitudes varied accordingly, however to maintain a clean house was an unquestionable duty. Clean house interiors were always maintained, despite children running in and out of the houses and the pressure of preparing food.

### **3.4.1 Morality**

This pre-occupation with cleanliness and the associations of dirt with being *Cigány* is part of the *Magyar-Cigány* divide, and is an articulation of the situation that the Roma find themselves in. Being clean, for them, is to demonstrate *Cigány* attributes and to show moral standing. It is also a demonstration of respectability and so brings them closer to *Magyar* status. However, the stereotype of the dirty *Cigány* penetrates popular thinking to such a degree that the Roma feel they can never be clean enough to prove themselves to the *Magyars*. This boundary presents itself as permeable, but the *Cigány* complain that in fact it is not. At a local *Magyar*-frequented pub, a *Magyar* man, indicating my muddy Doc Marten boots, said how one could tell I was living with the *Cigánys*. I knew by then that no self-respecting *Cigány* would wear such muddy footwear when not out working and recognized that the man's comment was based on nothing other than an untrue stereotype. Later, Katalin brought up the state of my shoes too. She chastised me for not cleaning them, to which I responded that I did not see the point in cleaning them if they are just going to get dirty again the next time I go outdoors. "You eat when you are hungry, don't you?" "Yes", I agreed. "And you get hungry again, and eat again, don't you?" It could be argued that Romany people are particularly sensitive to the accusation of being dirty and therefore take special pains to avoid this accusation, but as the example below shows, this is often not possible.

One day there was an unprecedented feeling of hostilities on one of the streets with everyone standing outside their houses on the road. Familiar faces were out, but the atmosphere was tense as people shouted to one another in angry and



defensive voices. A “foolish” (*bolond*) elderly *Magyar* woman had shouted at a *Cigány* lady, “Why don’t you tidy up?” The insult lay in the implication that the Romany woman was dirty. The recipient of this insult, always working hard to keep her family (*család*) well dressed and well fed, was visibly upset and shaken. Justifying and defending herself she said how she had been tidying and cooking that very morning. Showing her new, clean top she explained how she had only bought in a week before. There was no justification, from the woman’s appearance or work ethic, to justify this slanderous comment. She was determined to show that, far from being dirty, she was conscientiously clean.

In considering the Roma’s rather obsessive concern with cleanliness it is worth turning to ethnographies of other Romany communities and explaining why I have chosen not to label this concern with dirt and being clean as part of a system of purity and pollution beliefs. Again and again in ethnographic accounts of *Cigány* communities an ideological concern with the potentially pollutive effect of various behaviour arises. Referring to Douglas (1966), ethnographies on *Cigány* communities in different settings repeatedly describe societies adhering to strict codes and rules of behaviour in regard to the potential pollutive effect of the human body (linked to sexual morality too). Drawing on the ethnographic accounts of Rehfisch (1975), Sutherland (1975), Okely (1983) and Stewart (1997), it can be stated that while the expression of purity and pollution may vary between communities, the reason for these divides is rooted in the distinction between the Gaje and Romany worlds. *Cigánys* view non-Roma as inferior because of their disregard for conducting themselves according to the rules of purity and pollution. In reference to the concept of ‘marime’ and American Roma, Miller writes that “[l]ines are drawn between the Gypsies and the non-Gypsies, the clean and unclean, health and disease...” (1975:42). In the same vein, Okely writes of English travellers, “[a] fundamental expression of Gypsy identity was the ideological contrast between themselves and the gorgio. This was reinforced by pollution beliefs” (1975:63). This code of behaviour and conduct is a device for the Romany communities to claim the moral high ground and believe that they, through their moral superiority, are distancing themselves from pollutive mainstream society. In Epervár to be clean was seen as a moral imperative for everyone. It was not a device to distance oneself from the *Magyars*.

This idea of being dirty is firmly linked to the majority's perceptions of *Cigánys* as being inherently dirty. The Epervár Romany community is very aware of this stereotype and understand the circular, inescapable aspect of it: *Cigány* equals dirt and dirt equals *Cigány*. This can be seen in the comment by a Romany lady, "The Hungarians can be dirty and still be Hungarian but if you are *Cigány*, however clean you are, you are always *Cigány*". "See, even though I am a *Cigány* I keep a clean house", Melinda said, casting her eyes around her spotless little kitchen. The Epervár Romany community took pride in their cleanliness and incorporated the idea that to be clean reflected well upon one's character into their value system. "I am embarrassed to go to the shop with Rózsi's children", Melinda once said, referring to Judit and Péter who spent the summer playing outdoors, inevitably becoming dirty, wild and unkempt looking. However, this emphasis on dirt and cleanliness, while an everyday concern for women, is not part of a world view. There is no equivalent concept to 'marime'. *Magyars* are not dirtier than *Cigánys*; *Magyars* are not morally inferior. There is a commitment in the community to being clean and presentable and it is women who take on this household burden. Women's main duties are to maintain a clean house, provide food for her close family (*család*) and ensure that children are well-presented and cared for.

Melinda's comment that she was "embarrassed" (*szégyel*) to go to the shop with Rózsi's two youngest children, Judit and Péter, because of their appearance implies that badly presented children reflect on their mother's capabilities, not just as in her ability to carry out duties expected of mothers, e.g. feeding and clothing one's children, but also in her moral character. As the central figure in the private domain, the mother's standing as perceived by the larger Epervár Romany community, reflects upon every member of that particular household, and by association upon the more extended family (*testvér*). Therefore, Melinda's embarrassment was the result of all these factors combined. Aunt to these children (both women married to brothers), she felt the weight of this social responsibility. A proud woman, proud of her clean home, clean appearance and son's good presentation, her niece and nephew undermined her hard work in this area, and she therefore chose not to associate with them very closely, rarely allowing them to visit her family home without their mother.



András said, with frustration, that while his former *Magyar* girlfriend's father had disallowed their relationship, her close family actually lived in worse conditions than his. He described his ex-girlfriend's family home as being smaller and less luxurious than his own, with fewer rooms, a smaller television and fewer decorations. András had been cast as a *Cigány* unworthy of a *Magyar*, whereas in actual fact his standard of living was better than this particular *Magyar*'s. 'Dirt' was not specifically referred to by András, but the sentiments expressed are similar to those to do with dirt and cleanliness as articulated by the Epervár Roma. *Cigánys* are tarred with the same brush and they are unable to escape it, despite their best efforts, by virtue of being *Cigány*.

Similar conclusions can be drawn in regard to gender relations and sexuality.<sup>79</sup> The settlement is characterized, to a large extent, by its sexually charged atmosphere. There are no shows of public affection, but rather sexuality and sensuality is expressed in Roma's dress, movement and banter. Gender relations are expressed throughout the stylized treatment of women by men, although as this section has revealed, much of the boasting is not substantiated by action.<sup>80</sup> While in some respects sex was taboo, "I would not buy condoms from here as then everyone in Epervár would know that I am going to have sex. I would buy them from Szilvaszék. I would get Attila [Romanian cousin] to bring some over", András expounded on the subject of contraception. Rather than buy condoms or take the contraceptive pill, young men and women preferred more unreliable methods of avoiding pregnancy, and in consequence young women did become pregnant.<sup>81</sup> In contrast to this taboo surrounding contraception was the more open attitude to sexual relations. I was asked by young women if I had ever had sex and if I had ever had an abortion. A boy kept a small group of friends entertained one evening by telling stories of his sexual conquests in the school toilets, and Mihály jovially recalled the time a teacher had caught him in the act. The same taboo did not govern this topic area: sex was fun. As with the *Gitano* of Spain, there is no

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<sup>79</sup> In other Romany communities (Gay Blasco, 1999a; Stewart, 1997) sex is shameful.

<sup>80</sup> There is a strong division of labour within the community, and men and women socialize differently. These are more prominent and deep-rooted gender divides, but for the purpose of this thesis I shall concentrate on the themes that my informants associate with being *Cigány*.

<sup>81</sup> Considering that to be a wife and mother are prerequisites to becoming a woman, in the Epervár *Cigány* community, and is also the means of leaving home and becoming self-sufficient in your own household, it is perhaps not surprising that young ladies are not overly concerned in not becoming pregnant.



concept of friendship between males and females (Gay Y Blasco, 1999a:114), although in the *Gitano* discourse friendship between males and females is classed as an amoral, *Payo* trait (Gay Y Blasco, 1999a:114), the Epervár *Cigánys* do not compare their own behaviour to that of the *Magyars*.<sup>82</sup> This lack of moral supremacy is something I now turn to.

Comparing this unconstrained attitude to sexual and romantic relations to other Romany ethnographic accounts is interesting as in other communities sexual behaviour is often an indicator of morality. Gay Y Blasco (1999a) focuses on this aspect of *Gitano* culture, arguing that the distinction between the *Gitanos* and the *Payos* is the most important principle through which the Roma organize their daily lives and world-views, and that the distinction is one of superior morality, and that this morality is gendered (1999a:14). Similar sentiments are noted in Stewart's study of Vlach Roma, for example an example of polluting behaviour for the Harangos Roma is "obscene sexual acts" (1997:229) as practised by the non-Roma and the ideal bride is a virgin (1997:213). Although the story of a Harangos family laughing at a newly-wed couple's afternoon love making sessions is reminiscent of the general jovial attitude in this area in the Epervár setting (1997:227). Gender and sexuality are important facets of life for the Epervár Roma, but sexual relations, sexual conduct and dress are not subject to such a strict set of rules and norms of behaviour as among other Romany groups. It is not taboo, but rather to be laughed about.

Fonseca states that "well-defined codes of purity and contamination are the real universal language of Gypsies." (1995:80). I disagree with this statement as I believe that in Epervár a Hungarian *Cigány* community thrives, and that this community has no such codes, rules or regulations in regard to personal conduct, purity and contamination. In Epervár, as we have seen, there is a pressure for house interiors to be clean and there is a stigma attached to being "dirty" (*piszkos*) that is linked to the idea that dirtiness insinuates a reflection on one's moral character, however there is no concept of behaviour and sexual conduct articulating concepts of purity and pollution. The stereotype that *Cigánys* are dirty

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<sup>82</sup> The ambiguities and problems that arose from my attempts to built platonic friendships with males were explained to me by Katalin, who explained that while in England such friendship was normal, among the Epervár *Cigánys*, "*nálunk*", such friendships did not exist.



may have encouraged the community's diligent cleaning habits in an effort to disprove the slander. Alternatively, or concurrently, the regard and respect for cleanliness and its association with social standing may have evolved from purity and pollution beliefs as described in other Romany communities. However, in the Epervár community neither wage labour, nor menstruation, nor pre-marital sex are viewed as pollutive. One can wear trousers or skirts as the mood takes one, there is no need to wear a head-dress ever and trips to the swimming pool where swimsuits are worn are enjoyed by all. While I did not encounter a notion comparable to that of being "touchy" (a negative attribute of the *Magyars* that the Roma of Gömbalja are eager to avoid), the concept of dirt and how this reflects morality is similar to the Gömbalja community's concept of "grimy" (Horváth and Prónai, 2000). Neither community acknowledges purity and pollution beliefs, but rather have a well-developed internal value system based on cleanliness that allows for an internal hierarchy.

#### **4 Magyar-Cigány Local Interactions**

Roma find their characters questioned in a whole range of local situations. Once outside the settlement, the Roma are subject to judgement and scrutiny that it is alien to them in the safe environment of the settlement. For instance, one day on the bus travelling to Debrecen a group of six or so *Cigány* women were engaged in a usual loud and boisterous conversation touching on topics such as the cost of clothes and the various errands that they were on. Throughout the journey the stare of a *Magyar* couple sitting near the group was very noticeable and when the couple stood up to disembark at their stop, Melinda said in a loud voice, "What has that woman done to her hair?" The woman had died her hair a copper-red colour, and the comment was an obvious criticism. In making this exclamation clear, audible and pointed Melinda was re-asserting herself and letting it be known that she was not prepared to be stared at as if she and her companions were on stage. Moved outside the settlement, but in the safe company of friends, Melinda felt comfortable in asserting herself. In contrast, once in the city and only with me, Melinda hooked her arm through mine saying, "Be careful, there are skinheads here".

Melinda and her friends were unashamedly performing their *Cigány* identities on the bus. In the same way, at times settlement daily life was played out theatrically in the village centre for the *Magyar* inhabitants. On state benefit days, when money was distributed from the Mayor's office, women would generally queue inside the council building as men stood outside talking, standing by their cars. Young men would walk and talk loudly in their close friendship groups. Noisy and gregarious, families would move to the shops where the female heads of households would buy food, and together people would drift homewards, women talking with kids in tow, boys teasing one another and men wrapping up conversations and arrangements. Briefly and on only this occasion, the settlement moved into the village. On such an occasion in the village centre, one close family (*család*) complained that on entering the largest of the shops in the village centre, the ABC, they were followed round the shop: watched to make sure that they would not steal anything. The only reason that they were treated with such suspicion was because they were *Cigány*, they claimed. I experienced such a suspicious attitude for myself on a trip to the Epervár doctor's surgery. Accompanying a friend, I waited in the waiting room as she went in to the doctor's surgery for her appointment. As usual there was a number of Roma from the settlement either accompanying relatives, waiting to be seen, or queuing in the normal haphazard way to make an appointment or pick up a prescription from the receptionist who sat at a small service hatch. *Cigánys* always dominated the surgery, and pleasant exchanges would take place as people waited. On one occasion an elderly *Magyar* lady had been waiting. Called into the surgery she removed her long winter coat and hung it on the coat stand in a corner of the waiting room, whispering to me as she did so, "Look after my coat, there are faggots (*köcsög*) in here". As the only other non-Romany person in the room, this *Magyar* lady had turned to me. Not even waiting for a response, assuming my complicity, she left her coat and me as its keeper – guarding it from the *Cigánys* who were simply visiting their local doctor.

#### 4.1 Magyar Views

The views of local *Magyars* are informed by a number of sources. Interactions and news and gossip from the Romany community combine with stereotypes to inform the views of the Epervár non-Roma. There is an interesting contrast



between the speed of the spread of information within the Romany community, and the absence of information circulating about the *Magyars*. Áron and József's embarrassment in shouting over the fence to the female head of a *Magyar* household, living a few doors down from József, to buy rabbit cages from her husband only to be told that he had died, is a perfect illustration of this lack of information flow in the direction of *Magyars* to *Cigánys*. József and Áron had had simply no idea that the man was dead. Upon hearing the news they talked about it together afterwards and both commented that they had seen him fairly recently, in the past couple of months. The lack of spread of information is noticeable in this instance. A death is a major event of which to be ignorant. If a member of the *Cigány* community had died, the news would be common knowledge in an incredibly short period of time. The flow of information within the community is impressive and contrasts to the lack of information flowing between the two communities. The news that a young man, a Nagy, had the top of one his fingers cut off in a machinery accident, was known throughout the settlement by mid-afternoon. People were telling people, who nodded, already having heard the news from an alternative source. Much more insignificant news spread throughout the settlement at a comparable speed. I personally encountered the rapid speed of information flow on many occasions when news would reach home before I had. László lent me his bike which I rode constantly, so everyone in the community recognized the bike as mine, yet for László the bike, which had been his grandfather's, was of great personal value to him and I was privileged to be allowed to cycle it. One day I left the bike leaning against the wall of a house while I went indoors to visit. On coming out my bike had gone and it quickly transpired that a man from the household had borrowed it for a short errand. Having waited for his return, knowing it would be noticed if I returned home by foot, I cycled back to be greeted by László "I hear János took your bike. Don't let anyone borrow it!" Similar scenarios took place on a daily basis, and it was often difficult to identify the route that the information flow took. This lack of interaction between the two communities is surprising when one considers the lack of spatial boundaries between the settlement and the main body of the village. Other *Cigány* settlements in Hungary are separated physically from the main *Magyar* settlement, and in some *Cigány* settlements the *Magyar* quarter is referred to as "the village" (*a falu*). In the Epervár Romany settlement, the main



body of the village was most often referred to as “up” (*fent*), using common village terminology that conceives of the village in two halves.

In contrast to the lack of knowledge among the *Cigány* of happenings in the *Magyar* community, the *Magyars* have a fairly keen sense of the various *Cigány* personalities and what is going on. For example, the *Magyar* women working at the greenhouse asked me about Zsolt’s arrest only a short time after the incident. On another occasion, a *Magyar* lady asked another which *Cigány* family (*család*) had gone to Canada, the *Magyar* explained, “You know that little fat girl who used to cycle all the time? – her family”. The *Cigány* living in the small row outside the settlement got news from the main *Cigány* settlement through the *Magyars*. There is therefore a degree of information exchange and interaction, but this is mostly one way from the *Cigánys* to the *Magyars*. The local shop of the settlement, visited several times on a daily basis, is one place where the *Cigánys* of the settlement gossip and exchange information, and where the *Magyar* shop owner and occasional *Magyar* customers are given the opportunity to overhear the latest news circulating.

I first present the point of view of a local *Magyar* who has limited interactions with members of the Romany community. Before visiting the vet, László and Melinda muttered to one another that they did not know why I was going, he being “*zsivány*” (crooked), thereby discouraging this relationship. Throughout the course of the evening I began to appreciate the basis of their feelings. After having lived in Epervár for eight months, I had been invited for tea with the vet and his wife (an English teacher whose class I had helped out at) who were both fluent English speakers. Sitting around the table with two of their sons, I was unprepared for the culture shock. Of course, English being our common language meant that the conversation could reach a level that I could not achieve with my Hungarian friends. However, this alone was not the only explanation for the totally alien world I was in – despite cycling less than ten minutes to get there from my house in the settlement. This was a different world. “Do you hear that?” asked the wife, turning to her husband, “She plays cards in the evening”. It appeared that both expected to hear that I was engaged in some debauched activity, while in fact most evenings were spent either talking to my neighbours, alone, or most frequently round at Katalin’s home where we played cards, talked and watched



television. Hearing that I had no hot water, only an electric stove top and that I relied on a wood burner for heat (the common standard of living for *Epervár Cigány* household, although most have gas-fuelled cooking facilities), the vet laughed, “It’s like camping!” And so it was, but this was how the *Cigánys* of the settlement lived their whole lives, and this was the situation that their children were ‘looking forward to’ inheriting.

I had spent the past eight months cocooned in the Romany community where everything had its place in the cycle. However the vet’s opinions and stories showed a different, albeit ill-informed, interpretation of settlement life. He couldn’t believe that, as he saw it, the *Cigánys* did nothing all day. “What do they do with the hamstering money? Buy a car and drive around the village in it – selling it in the winter when they have no money and then just sit all day”. Yet he had failed to take time out and consider the men as they stood by their cars in the early morning while their wives bought provisions for the day and the dynamics behind what he saw. Business and connections and relationships are the core of these discussions. Informal business activities of the kinds noted are dependent on word of mouth and networks. Information is constantly being exchanged. The speed of flow of information is incredible and necessary in a community reliant on taking advantage of deals and opportunities as the earliest possible moment.

The vet threw up lots of little stories that he used to support his general stereotypes. For example, he told the story of how *Cigánys* bought the first batches of strawberries in the shop, despite the fact that, being the first crop of the season, they were exorbitantly expensive. The vet could not understand why the poor *Cigánys* chose to act in this way. To him this behaviour lacked rational thought, a sense of logic, of planning, of common sense. Another jibe was directed at *Cigánys* all having nick-names. Generally known by neither their first name nor their surname, *Cigány* men in particular were known throughout the settlement by their nick-names and the vet laughed at this as it showed a very different sense of respectability among the *Cigánys*.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> In the settlement there was, for example, *Fülés*: Big Ears, *Kayla*: Cocked-eared dog, *Kormos*: Sooty and *Csimpi*: a play on the Hungarian word for chimpanzee as he supposedly resembled one.

The vet's comments provided an insight into how *Magyar* villagers perceived life in the settlement. Rarely entering the settlement these perceptions were formed through stories and myths. "There are no chickens in the village", the vet said "nor in any village in this area because on one night the *Cigánys* came and took them all". The Mayor's deputy had said similar things at our first meeting as she expounded on the fact that the village did not have any major problems with the *Cigány* population ("az etnikum"), other than the theft of chickens.<sup>84</sup> Melinda bought chickens from a local *Magyar* lady and I was friends with a *Cigány* woman whose family (*család*) tended chickens so the idea of there being a total absence of chickens from the village was a myth. Unperturbed, the vet told a variety of such stories: "I have a friend who owns land on which he grows potatoes. One time he saw *Cigánys* digging up and stealing his crop so he went to confront them and got beaten up", and "I once employed a couple of *Cigánys* to weed an area of land and I joined them in the afternoon after they had been working all that morning, and I did as much work as the two of them together in half the time".

I shall now look at the attitudes of local *Magyars* who do interact with Roma. Interviewing the shopkeepers, Lili and her husband, was a useful way of gaining insight into the attitudes of *Magyars* who know and like the Epervár Roma of the settlement. They said that those *Magyars* in the village who did not live near the *Cigány* disliked them, but for no reason. Lili's shop is the only one in the area and is frequented several times on a daily basis by settlement residents. The shop sits on one of the corners of the settlement and everyone simply calls it "Lili's". It is a convenient and well-positioned business, and over time the owners have built a rapport and understanding with their customers, the majority of whom are *Cigány* with the occasional *Magyar*. While the Roma claim that the shop is in fact more expensive than the others in the centre of the village, and is definitely more expensive than the large Tesco superstore in Debrecen or Penny's Market in Szilvaszék, the convenience and social atmosphere of this village shop meant that everyone from the settlement went there at one time or another. Asking the shopkeepers about the accusation that their prices are higher than other shops in the village, they argue that their prices cannot be higher otherwise the Roma would shop elsewhere. "One cannot please everyone in the community" said Lili.

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<sup>84</sup> "*Etnikum*" is an extremely offensive word.



“It is difficult to handle the *Cigánys*. If you give them a finger, they want your arm” (Lili’s husband).

The shop is, as with all the small village shops (of which there were many scattered throughout the village), laid out so that the shop assistant fetches what the customer asked for. It has a counter with the cash register on it at the front of the shop, while behind is stored all the goods: cartons of juice, tins of food, a fridge full of salami and cheese, a freezer of convenience foods and ice creams, sweets, fruit and vegetables. There is generally a small crowd in the shop, waiting to be served. The bundle of waiting customers is a chance for social interaction, and much gossip is exchanged in the shop premises. Normally the crowd is composed mainly of women and children, although it is not unusual to see a man in the shop, and all wait patiently to be served. There is no concern to rush, with each individual transaction a measured and lengthy exchange. It is noted by the waiting customers, however, who arrives and where they stand and the shop keeper too tries to keep an eye on the arrivals. An order is adhered to, although it is easy to be over-looked and a level of assertion is sometimes needed to avoid this.

Here Rita’s transaction in Lili’s premises will serve as an example and illustration of a typical shop exchange. With no greetings or smiles exchanged, Rita, knowing that she has come for three nappies and a packet of milk powder, asks for three nappies. The shop keeper turns to get these, bringing them to the counter and laying them down. “And a packet of milk powder”. “Which one?” the shop keeper asks, standing by the milk powder. There is a choice of two and so Rita inquires as to how much they both cost. Rita asks for the cheaper one and the shop keeper brings it over. At this point, Rita is standing by the counter. Often there are a couple of children close by her, clutching money, waiting to be served, while behind her and beside her is a close crowd of adults, making occasional exchanges, talking quietly, and often standing in silence. Rita does not rush however, and asks how much the goods have cost her so far. Using a calculator the shop keeper tells her. Rita lays down the money and counts how much is left in her hand. “Give me three sweets”. “Which ones?” “Two of those in the wrapper and one of those red ones”. The sweets are laid down and the money pushed over. Taking her items, Rita leaves the shop, perhaps throwing a good-bye over her

shoulder “*Hallo*” (Good bye). The next transaction follows a similar pattern. The lack of verbal communication, the absence of friendly smiles, the slow and measured pace, the enquiry of prices of goods when at home women know the cost of everything in the shop is intriguing. As explained above, a lack of greeting and thanking are integral to the community’s identity of itself, and are played out in the shop setting too.

To not smile and to not thank was something I found difficult to get used to after years of being programmed in British politeness. In the shop my twelve-year-old friend would whisper harshly to me to “not thank” (*Ne köszönj!*). One time, as I neared the end of my fieldwork, I bought something from the shop unconsciously using all the skills I had learnt from my time there: no greeting, no thanking, an ordering attitude, a measured appraisal of my finances and the cost of goods. It was only when the shop keeper smiled at me as I left the shop that I realized how I had behaved, and considered that my previous, alien behaviour had made her feel just as uncomfortable as it had my fellow customers. Asking Lili about this very particular form of interaction. Lili agreed that this was particular to the Roma. Rather than use the common polite phrases, “Thank you”, “Please” and “There you are” they rather blurt, “Give me!” (*Adjál mán!*). She smiled with good humour as she spoke of this quirky style.

Lili’s shop had grown from being a small outpost in her garage (in 1992), to a grocery stocking a whole variety of goods (in 1994), through market demand. People would knock on her front door asking if they could buy from her a nappy – knowing that she had some for her own baby. The shop grew so that Lili had to give up her job as a teacher to manage the business. Now, both husband and wife are tired out from the work. The shop is open 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. in the summer months, to serve customers leaving for and returning to work. With a constant flow of customers, it is demanding work. As *Magyars*, it was at first strange that they set up a shop in the settlement, but over time the community got to know and accept them. Lili smiles fondly, happy that she has become a familiar and trustworthy figure for the Romany community. With such a position in the community, the shopkeepers have a unique insight into the *Cigány* community as they have established a familiar and trusting relationship with the local population. Recounting stories, Lili refers to the *Cigány* nick-names, knowing



their personalities and life stories. They are aware that they have a different attitude to the Roma from that of those *Magyars* in the village who do not live near to the *Cigány* settlement.

## **5 Conclusion**

A particularly striking element of many of the Epervár *Cigány* attitudes towards *Magyar-Cigány* relations is how much it contrasts with the *Magyars*' view of their relationship and the observations I make in this thesis. Many Roma in the settlement state that there is no racism in the village: that the two communities get on very well.<sup>85</sup> "There is no animosity between the two communities in Epervár... There is no racial prejudice against the *Cigány* in Epervár. The *Magyars* are simply in a better position economically. The Roma are poorer and come from a more disadvantaged background" (Árpád). Enquiring about the reason for the lack of Roma-*Magyar* marriages, it is often explained that there is no social forum for the two communities to meet. Besides, such a marriage would not work, it is said, because the *Magyars* are unable to cope with the poverty of the *Cigány*.<sup>86</sup> For many Epervár *Cigány*, discrimination is not a factor in explaining why the living standards of the Epervár Roma is so low. Instead it is explained by a different attitude to money, or simply that that is how it always has been. To illustrate the high level of integration, it is pointed out that Roma and non-Roma greet each other on the street,<sup>87</sup> and hold up the fact that the school is not segregated as both a result and indication of good relations.<sup>88</sup> For proponents of this view, the whole village is poor and inhabitants are surviving as best they can. Elek interlinked his fingers and clasped them together to show the close relationship between *Magyars* and *Cigánys*. "There is no racial discrimination here", I was told ("*Nincs fajielőítélet*").

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<sup>85</sup> Many of these people will acknowledge that there is racial discrimination in other areas of Hungary.

<sup>86</sup> There are instances of *Magyar-Cigány* marriages. I noted that these mixed marriages were often first marriages, and the spouse went on to marry a Roma after the marriage break-up. However, male *Cigánys* suffer a particular kind of discrimination in that *Magyar* fathers do not want their daughters to date them. Tibor's *Magyar* girlfriend was beaten by her father and called a "*Cigány* prostitute". For some in the village it was practice for the *Magyar* young ladies and *Cigány* young men to date in secret, defying the *Magyar* parents.

<sup>87</sup> I rarely saw greetings exchanged between *Magyars* and *Cigánys*.

<sup>88</sup> As the first chapter explained, segregation in schools is becoming increasingly common, so this is indeed very powerful evidence of a weaker tendency to racial exclusion here.



Not all Epervár Roma share these views, however. Several identified racial discrimination in Epervár. One man explained that the settlement was a ghetto and that his and his close family's (*család*) lives were severely restricted by their ethnicity. While legally his family (*család*) could move into any part of the village, he said that his new *Magyar* neighbours would not tolerate them. Using a similar hand gesture to the one described above, he motioned a different scenario to support his point of view. With hands slightly apart, he wiggled the fingers so that the fingertips brushed slightly, saying that that was the reality of relations between the Roma and *Magyars*. For him, there was slight, superficial interaction but no closer relationships.

As the *Magyar* shopkeepers rightly said, those *Magyars* who live near the *Cigány* settlement and interact with the Roma know something of the *Cigány* and do not hold wholly unfavourable views ("There are good *Cigány* and bad *Cigány* just like all people" and "There are bad *Cigány*, but in Epervár we have good *Cigány*" were two comments I heard), while those that live further away know less about the Roma and have more negative views about them in consequence. As the previous chapter demonstrated, this anti-*Cigány* discrimination has long been an issue in Hungary. In 1978, the behaviour of and negative views held by the non-Romany population were considered to be an essential component in hindering the social assimilation of the Roma. Among the mainstream population a local communist officer noted that there was much "prejudice and fear" (Jelentés, 1978:15). This 1978 report identifies two types of prejudice concerning Roma here. The first, "among simple people" (Jelentés, 1978:15) is the widespread opinion that Gypsies are violent, parasitic, criminals, alcoholics and do not like to work. The word "*Cigány*" is generally used in a pejorative, branding sense. The second form of prejudice is pseudo-scientific. This states that Roma are physically – genetically – determined for anti-social behaviour. The 1978 report noted a growing aversion against employing *Cigánys*. Co-operative farms were employing many Roma in seasonal labour or as occasional workers, but they were still not accepted as members of the co-operative.<sup>89</sup> Employers often referred to hygiene or

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<sup>89</sup> Bell reports the case of a Romany man being refused work at his local collective farm as the management argued that the farm's method of payment would not be suitable to Roma who would quickly spend all their money on food and drink, leaving nothing for the medium-term future (1984:288).



sanitary reasons when refusing to employ them. Since 1978, widespread opinion remains similar. Prejudice against Roma continues to shape popular opinion of *Cigánys* and continues to influence and restrict the opportunities open to Roma. The view of many local *Cigánys* is that discrimination has become more acute since the end of state socialism.

Lili, the *Magyar* shop keeper, also believes that relations between the two communities have worsened in the past ten years. Since 1989, she claims that there has been a massive in-migration of Roma which has led to numerous problems: theft, chickens going missing and a drop in the intellectual level of children. The low intellectual level of these *Cigány* children is the reason why many non-Roma, such as Lili and her husband, choose to send their children to schools in Debrecen and Szilvaszék, as they do not believe that their children will get a proper education in Epervár. Since 1989, she claims that more and more Romany children have been dropping out of school early. Nowadays, she says, *Magyars* prefer to avoid the Roma as “they have a different temperament”. “The *Cigánys* must be kept at arm’s length. The same applies to the *Magyars*, but not to the same extent” (Lili). Bell (1984), noting many of the same stereotypes that persist in Epervár today, argues that the term *Cigány* has become a behavioural descriptor as much as an ethnic term. Bell’s ethnographic study took place among a non-Roma, Hungarian, rural community, so the perspective of his piece is primarily a *Magyar* one. His conclusion that, for the *Magyars*, two moral communities have developed bears close resemblance to the evidence in Epervár. The historical context of integration and containment, and the varied accounts of what qualities make one *Cigány*, supports the view that the categories *Cigány* and *Magyar* are flexible, but the evidence presented in this chapter indicates that *Magyars* are trying to keep strict control of these moral boundaries.

According to ethnographic studies, Romany communities share an opposition to mainstream society that is expressed and embodied in moral supremacy. Roma believe that non-Roma act in potentially pollutive ways by not respecting codes of purity and pollution (Okely, 1983; Sutherland, 1975; Rehfisch, 1975; Gay Y Blasco, 1999a). However, in a departure to these studies, I have argued in this chapter that the two moral communities are neither based on purity/pollution taboos, nor ranked in direct opposition with each other, but that Epervár Roma at



times see merit in acting like *Magyars*. These traits are included in *Cigány* identity: contributing to the *bricoleur* nature of Romany identity (Okely, 1983:77). “Gypsies adopt and adapt many aspects of non-Gypsy culture, redefine them and incorporate it into their own” (Silverman, 1988:267). These cultural traits are not however, simply appropriated and inverted (see Gay Y Blasco’s discussion (1999b) on Stewart (1997) and Okely (1983)). Gay Y Blasco, drawing on Stewart’s analysis of the place of horses in Vlach Romany life (1997:142-145), discusses gender morality within the wider non-Romany Spanish historical context and concludes that “the Gitanos have attempted to remain distinct by engaging with concerns that are as much Payo as they are Gitano – rather than by creating a completely alternative moral order” (1999b:16). Like the Spanish *Gitano*, the Epervár *Cigány* are not simply inverting non-Romany values. There is a more respectful process of appropriation and redefinition. With no substantial concept of potentially pollutive behaviour, I therefore question Mirga’s conclusion that defilement is an essential factor in the Roma world view by presenting evidence to support the existence of a situation in which “the defilement category does not function at all, which means it is not relevant in determining the character of the Roma-Gažo” (Mirga, 1987:251).

While the Epervár Roma do not claim moral supremacy, there is a definite sense of pride at being *Cigány*. Often adults would admire their children’s singing or dancing with the comment that they could perform that well because they were *Cigány*. The ability of Roma to love their family (*család*) and welcome people into their home was another source of pride. László loved to hear me agree with his observation that life was fun during the summer months, with everyone out on the streets talking and playing until late. He was proud of the friendly and communal atmosphere in the settlement. Károly spoke of the Roma’s skill at certain crafts, and everyone in the settlement believed that the Roma were far more beautiful than the non-Roma. Asking András if he felt ambiguous as to his identity following his stories of *Magyar* girlfriends and friendships and his pride in his non-Romany skin, I received a curt and enlightening response, “No. I am *Cigány*”. Despite the ambiguity and ambivalence of being *Cigány*, and the different processes by which one expresses one’s identity, the Roma of the settlement feel a deep sense of belonging and pride. While viewed as ‘the assimilated’ by other Romany groups, these *Romungro* have a complex identity



that allows them to participate to an extent in the *Magyar* world, while remaining a distinct group set apart. The Roma utilize this flexibility in their economic strategies and in their dealings with the Dignity Foundation, and in doing so further consolidate their unique position in society.

## Chapter Three

### Testvér and Relatedness

#### 1 Relatedness

In anthropological literature, ‘family’ is commonly recognized to be an important factor in the social composition of Romany groups (Gay Y Blasco, 1999a:144; Horváth, forthcoming) but in the Epervár Romany context, the term ‘family’ inadequately describes the “lived experience” (Stafford, 2000:37) of relatedness. In this chapter, I shall therefore explore the local idiom for relatedness, ‘*testvér*’, and the inter-connected themes of obligation, responsibility, trust, allegiance and distrust that are pivotal idioms of the community’s social relations. ‘*Testvér*’ is translated in dictionaries, and used in mainstream Hungarian society, to mean ‘brother’ or ‘sister’, but within the Epervár Romany community the word is used much more widely to describe a whole range of social relationships that can be categorized as ‘extended family’. The explanations as to how two people were *testvér* were often complex. *Testvér* is both political and personal. It shapes and influences all areas of Epervár Romany life, and the community is aware of this – both proud in their commitment to one another and their capacity to love, while also deeming the prioritization of fellow *testvér* in all circumstances as ‘crooked’ (*zsivány*). This is the central contradiction in the Epervár Romany concept of *testvér*. In this chapter, we shall examine how *testvér* is one of the most fundamental building blocks of the Epervár *Cigány* community and, as the final chapters shall make explicit, *Magyar* NGOs working with *Romungro* groups should therefore have to fully appreciate the extent that these relations of *testvér* dominate all community relations.

For the purpose of this thesis, unfortunately I have had to, by and large, limit my analysis of relatedness to public interactions, of both the everyday and rarer kind, rather than deconstructing everyday relatedness at the household level (Carsten, 1997:Part I). However, I shall briefly explore the model of close family (*család*) that, unlike extended family (*testvér*), presents itself as an undisputable unit of relatedness. Asking people, “What is the most important thing in your life?” always elicited the immediate response, whether from male or female, “My family” (*A családom*). This concept of close family (*család*) refers to spouses,



brothers, sisters, children and grandchildren and is best interpreted as people who live or had lived together in one household.

An extremely narrow definition of family (*család*) was offered by László as, hospitalized for three months following the amputation of his other leg, we shared an emotional good bye in his hospital ward. “Melinda was a little crooked (*zsivány*), wasn’t she?”<sup>90</sup> he asked in reference to my stay in the village. The half-laugh in his intonation did not hide the seriousness in what he was saying. “But none of my family (*család*) hurt you (*bántani*), eh?” He mentioned his brother in Canada, “He didn’t hurt you”, his mum, “She didn’t hurt you”. Satisfied that his ‘family’ had acted correctly with me at all times, he urged me to visit him next time I was in Hungary, “Come to *me*, visit *me*, not Melinda”. In this instance, László drew the boundaries of *család* to their most restrictive by making a distinction between his blood relatives (mother and brothers) and his relationship to Melinda as an outsider who married in. However, this definition of *család* was exceptional, more common was the idea that *család* was close family consisting of household members. People expressed *család* relations as rooted in unconditional love. The concept of *testvér*, in comparison, is much more complex and informs and motivates political, social and economic actions. The importance of loyalty to *testvér* and mistrust of non-*testvér* has ramifications for all aspects of communal life, as we shall explore in this thesis.

The web-like structure of *testvér* became clear to me when I tried to correlate family trees. Relations of close family (*család*) fitted relatively neatly onto one sheet of paper, but collecting the wider, extended family tree, relations of *testvér*, not only took great patience and explanation of the data I was after, but necessitated complex annotations and eventually the sticking together of sheets of A4 to create one huge canvas on which to draw the networks of relations.<sup>91</sup> How should I best describe this web-like structure? Astuti (2000:91-93) compares and contrasts her interpretation of an Iban informant’s analogy of bilateral kinship to the making of a casting-net, on which he is at the periphery of the net and ignorant of his actual relations, with Freeman’s (1970:68). Astuti positions her old Madagascan informant at the centre of the small cone from which a similar net

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<sup>90</sup> The implications of this comment will be explained later in this chapter.

<sup>91</sup> The family tree is included as an appendix on page 244.



grew amongst his Madagascan kindred, with all people positioned on the net as his descendants. She suggests that Freeman's interpretation would be better suited to a pool of water with ripples caused from throwing in a stone, tracing relations from ego in a two-dimensional way. Bearing this discussion in mind, I consider an appropriate analogy for relations of *testvér* in Epervár. The structure, like the casting-net, should be three-dimensional reflecting the inter-generational nature of *testvér*. However, there are a couple of attributes to the nature of *testvér* in the Epervár Romany population that do not lend themselves to the casting-net analogy. Everyone, of every generation, can claim to be the ego, the centre, of the net with moral relations to everyone else on the net. The ego need not be an old man with generations beneath him (see Astuti, 2000). The second characteristic of *testvér* that does not lend itself easily to such a casting-net analogy is that the people who would be included on the net as *testvér* would change according to the situation. So, not only would each person need their own 'casting-net', of which they are the centre, but who is included on each net changes according to the situation. Working from Astuti's discussion of appropriate analogies for different forms of relatedness provides a good basis for analysing the nature of relatedness in Epervár, although I have unfortunately been unable to find an appropriate analogy for *testvér*.

Leaving analogies aside, *testvér* is primarily about allegiance. As Bloch eloquently argues (1971), kinship terminology is a moral concept used strategically in certain situations. This is certainly true for the concept of *testvér*, which is deliberately and strategically manipulated depending on the situation. As I shall demonstrate in this chapter, *testvér* are obliged to support and defend each other in a variety of contexts – most often in dispute situations. Depending on the circumstances surrounding the cleavage, the support network that is called upon varies. In large disputes, an extensive *testvér* network is expected to provide support. In such cases, people that are not regular members of *testvér* activities have to show allegiance to their relatives to whom they are not particularly close on other, more mundane, occasions (everyday greetings, birthday celebrations, etc.). Likewise, a death will cause people who rarely acknowledge close relatives of the deceased to pass on their condolences – expressing their respect and sorrow in terms of being related in some way to the deceased and the deceased's close family (*család*). More pointedly, the *testvér* of the deceased are morally obliged to



attend the funeral. As the following funeral of a Romany man demonstrates, this is one of the rare occasions when the most extensive interpretation of *testvér* must be respected.<sup>92</sup>

Following the *Cigány* man's unexpected death, two evening wakes were held, one closely following his death and the second the evening before his funeral, and both of these were attended by *testvér* members. The house where the man had lived was packed with people sitting – lining two rooms. The atmosphere was sombre with everyone sitting head bowed or with an appropriately morose facial expression. The wailing of his wife from the bedroom and the occasional sighting of his tear-drenched daughter set the tone. Drinks, soft and alcoholic, were hospitably offered to all the guests by the mother of the deceased. At first the conversation centred mostly on the deceased man's last moments. He had died in his sleep, having eaten and drunk milk and spoken to his mother before going to bed. There had been no sign that he was ill. Following an accident over a decade ago, he had been confined to a wheelchair. László's brother had been driving through Epervár when the car, in which he was a passenger, crashed. Afraid that the car would catch fire, rescuers dragged the now deceased man from the car in an unconscious state. He had been in the middle of the back seat, without a seat belt, and so had felt the full force of the crash. The outcome was that the man's spine was severed, and he was paralyzed from the waist down. His death, however, had been unexpected. At this wake, conversation gently rolled, with László being an impressive instigator, using his conversational skills to good affect. This solidarity and respect shown for the deceased and his close family (*család*) by the attendance at these wakes was significant. The funeral itself attracted an even greater number of people as kin from the outer edges of the *testvér* network systems attended.

Dressed in black, or a combination of black and white, with many of the men in dark glasses, the aesthetics of the occasion was impressive. A bright day, people gathered at noon, lining the route and entrance into the building where the coffin was. Last to walk up the cemetery path was the deceased's close family (*család*). The wife and daughter, barely able to walk and moaning in grief, were supported

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<sup>92</sup> László's mother's decision not to go to this funeral, when the deceased was her sister's son, caused Melinda to dismiss her mother-in-law as not behaving correctly: for being lazy (*lusta*).



by male relatives as they made their way to the building. Over the next hour or so, people trooped into the room to pay their last respects and lay flowers. Everyone had brought professionally constructed bunches and wreaths of flowers that they laid around the coffin. Very quickly the floor was heaped with flowers, and these were later moved by van to the freshly covered grave where, following the ceremony, an elaborate flower structure was constructed to adorn and decorate the grave. Two women, the man's wife and sister, were in throes of agony throughout the viewing period. Again and again, the women would enter the building, see the man, break into wails and shudders and faint. The men accompanying the women would support their slumped bodies, taking them to a bench outside where water and cloths would be administered by concerned relatives. Regaining composure, ignoring everyone and everything, the women wandered like rag dolls back into the room, where once again grief would overcome them. This was played out until the coffin lid was finally shut, producing the most harrowing wail from these mourning women. Throughout the proceedings ballads of a much loved Hungarian musician, Jimmy Zámbo, were played from a loudspeaker in the van. This music was highly emotive. In a brief pause in the music, silence fell over the cemetery, and the atmosphere calmed. The music heightened the sadness of the occasion. Daughter, son and widow were separate in their grief, supported by particular friends throughout the proceedings: the teenage daughter's lolling head was supported by her boyfriend, the teenage son's best friend was constantly by his side. Physical and emotional support was offered by these friends. The occasion was highly distressing and emotional. The display of grief was extravagant and physical. It was an unashamed and theatrical style of mourning.<sup>93</sup>

On the occasion of this funeral, solidarity and respect between *testvér* were shown to overcome hostilities and disputes. People who did not display *testvér* relations in everyday interactions stood side by side during the ceremony. With about two-hundred and fifty people in attendance, the most expansive interpretation of *testvér* was in evidence. Nearly everyone from the settlement was in attendance.

Funerals are relatively rare and insightful events in terms of understanding the community's structure. The director of the Dignity Foundation had had a similar revelation in similar circumstances. She too had viewed Epervár as a settlement

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<sup>93</sup> Similar to Fonseca's description of a funeral (1995:250).



harshly divided along lines of *testvér*. Again and again, disputes and jealousies and lack of cooperation had interfered detrimentally with Dignity Foundation projects in the area (see Chapter Five). However, it was on attending the funeral of an Epervár Romany woman and seeing that everyone who had previously claimed to be enemies was there, that she was forced to reconsider her view of the relationships within the settlement. “They have different surnames, but it became clear over the course of our relationship with the village that the village is ultimately one family” (Zsuzsanna Kovács).<sup>94</sup> Consequently, Zsuzsana Kovács remains unclear as to whether they were victims of a conspiracy (everyone was extended family and playing themselves off each other for the benefit of fooling the Dignity Foundation), or not. From my understanding of the social circumstances in the settlement, the Dignity Foundation was not fooled in this way. The resentments, accusations and breakdown in relationships experienced by those involved in the project were genuine. It is only in specific circumstances that *testvér* divisions are overcome – and this is something that any successful community-based micro-credit scheme must consider carefully, and a point I turn to later.

For now, we turn to the more ordinary everyday instances of *testvér* interaction. The composition of work teams is one way of observing the relationships between people as ‘family first’ is the dominant strategy in recruitment. Work teams are composed primarily of *család* (close family) and when more people are needed (e.g. factory placements, hoeing) close *testvér* (extended family) are taken on. Tensions do arise from this family first attitude. As shall become clearer in later in this chapter, there is a contradictory element to this allegiance to *testvér*. One lady (Albert’s wife) refused to work for Katalin upon realizing that the men’s jobs had all been filled by Katalin’s close male relatives. The lady in question believed that her son should be given preference over work and found it offensive that she would have to work with men which were Katalin’s close *testvér* while her son stayed unproductively at home. As far as Katalin was concerned, it was only natural that her own sons were given the work. Fellow workers futilely tried to

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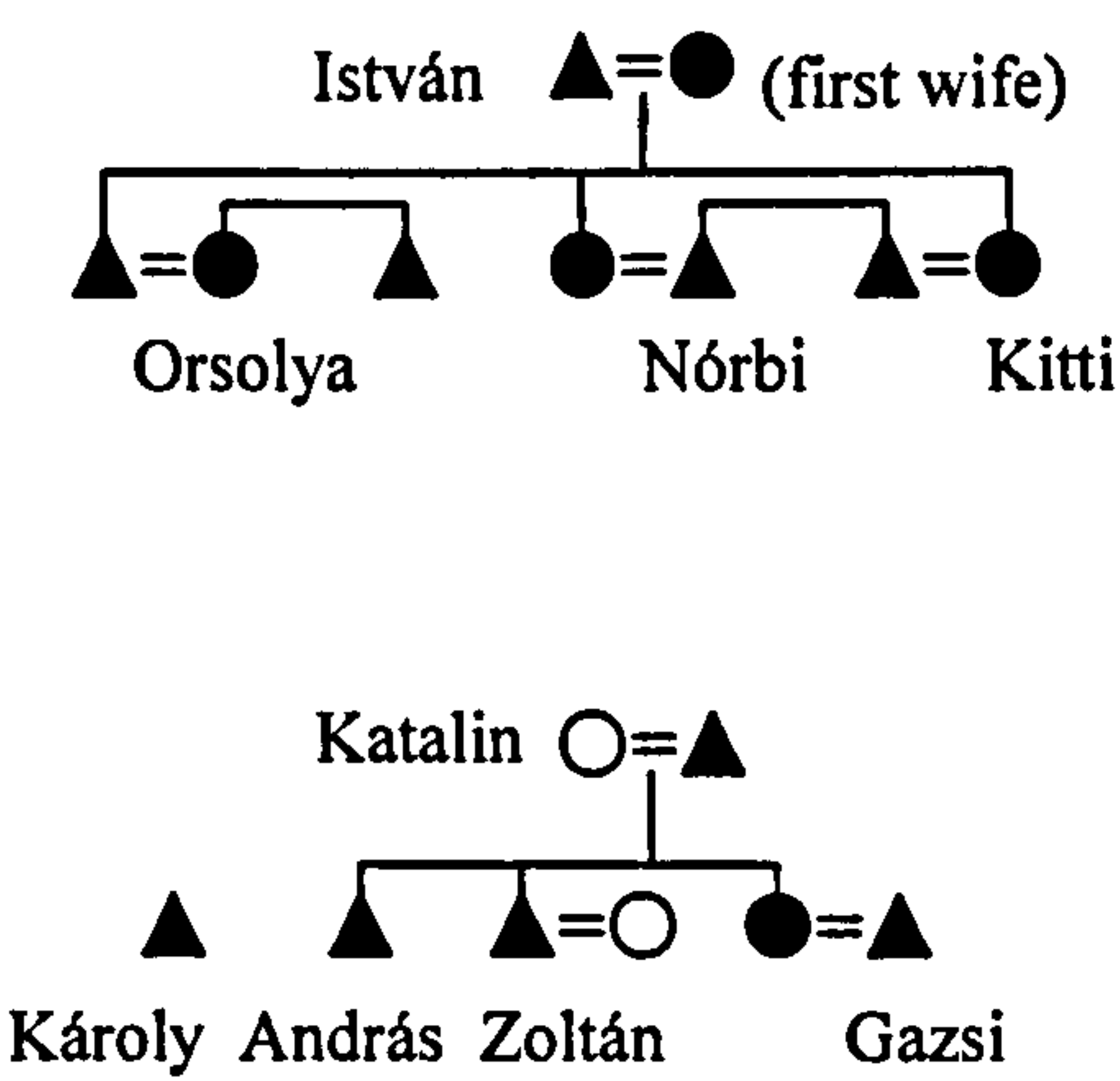
<sup>94</sup> Reviewing the Dignity Foundation’s involvement with Epervár, it would seem that the Dignity Foundation director was primarily dealing with one *testvér* network in the village. The director is correct in her observation that surname is not a guaranteed basis for identifying *testvér* relations.

calm the complainant down, until Katalin eventually resorted to the exclamation that the lady could go home if she did not like it, which she did.

The all-male hamstering teams are composed primarily of close *testvér* and cross household boundaries, so are a useful way of gauging relationships. For example, the most successful team was composed of the father (István, László's brother), his son, his daughter-in-law's brother (Orsolya's brother: this was before Orsolya and István's son split up) and two sons-in-law. The daughter's boyfriend's other brother worked for László, while the other two team members of László's team were friends of his. Katalin's team consisted of close *testvér* males: two of Katalin's sons, a 'fostered' man (Károly) and her son-in-law. While László's team was brought together just for the hamstering, as a few teams in Epervár are, István's and Katalin's teams regularly work together. The core of István's team constantly work together in informal dealings and business ventures. Katalin's group are a strong, solid team that work every day (weather permitting) at one organized work place or another. In both cases, the teams' relationships are the heart and basis of many activities, from work and business to recreational fishing. With workers remaining loyal to their team throughout the season, these core groups, based primarily on close extended family (*testvér*) ties, allow an overview of the dynamics of the settlement. The mosaic of the community becomes visually clear. On a couple of occasions, László's nephew through marriage, who hamstered with István, joined in the skinning process with László's team. Having finished his own catch, he sat down and joined the circle, helping László's team to get through their pile of hamsters. As he had endured the routine of tramping miles of land, his help was a real gesture of solidarity and friendship. László's brother would wander over and inspect the catch, throwing comments to the working men, but never once sat down to join in.



Two groups of close *testvér*/work teams



The competition, cooperation and rivalry displayed during hamstering seasons are intriguing. While generally there is good natured and amicable rivalry, with teams returning home to curious glances and shouted questions, “How many today?” to which often highly inflated answers are given, “Ten thousand!”, there was a more volatile relationship between these non-*testvér* teams. László had earned a great deal of respect in the community, but his loss of leg had been both a psychological and practical blow. Unable to rely on his ability to win fights to settle disputes, László brought a gun with him when he went hamstering. As yet he has had no need to use it, but situations arise in the hamstering business that could easily spiral out of control. For example, one rival, non-Epervár team believed that László’s team was unfairly laying claim to a particular patch of land, so the rival team set off all of László’s traps in order that no hamster could be caught in them that night. A heated argument erupted out of doors and the landowner was called to intervene and settle the dispute – deeming the land to be under László’s jurisdiction.

An additional source of conflict is the tradition of stealing hamster traps. Basically there is a constant movement of traps between rival teams. László, finding a dozen of his missing, went out on a mission to steal some back from another person’s plot of land. László justified this by saying that everyone steals traps from everyone else. Yet, significantly, this was one time I was dissuaded from joining in the activity. Another team, Katalin’s close *testvér*, took the action of returning late at night with torches in the hope of surprising the thieves in the act. On other occasions for a whole week they have slept out in a tent in order to guard their

traps. Some teams took measures to deter thieves and make post-theft identification easier by marking their traps with daubs of paint. On one trip a worker from László's team found an untriggered trap. He took it back with him to the car, aware that it was not one of theirs because of the splash of red paint on it that another team had used to identify their own traps. Rather hesitantly the man packed it with their gear, saying that if not it would just have been left useless outdoors, it had obviously been over-looked and left behind by its owners.<sup>95</sup> *Testvér* rivalries, competition and business create a vibrant interaction of workers.

Life on the streets provides a view of more subtle interactions than that provided by the work teams, and presents a sharp contrast to the solidarity shown at the funeral. While the communal and public nature of life in the settlement, with its open door policy, and people's preference for outdoor socializing and interaction, means that the community superficially presents itself as an integrated and interactive community, settlement interactions are primarily divided along *testvér* lines. Streets are the setting of life and who stands on which corner and who sits by which house or in which yard, sheds light on the dynamics of the community. Most groups gather on the busier three interconnecting streets, routes to the local shop, so there are plenty of opportunities for interaction. As one walks past, depending on one's relationship to the group one is passing, one is greeted quite differently – if at all. Therefore, to an extent, it is possible to identify affiliations from just walking through the settlement. However, the divide is not so severe as those observed by Gay Y Blasco (1999a:41-46) and Horváth and Prónai (2000) where extended family networks are clearly demarcated by the physical lay-out of the Roma's housing. The situational aspect of relations in the Epervár settlement means that there are few strict, constant boundaries, as we shall see in this chapter.

Greetings, smiles, waves and inquiries were subject to a set of norms, rules and codes of behaviour. Normally not referred to, rules such as whom to associate

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<sup>95</sup> Similar marking methods were used by the men who collected and bundled cane. Bundles of cane were stolen one night from the Karcag site. Gazsi's team had an idea as to who had stolen the cane and to where it was as they had been tipped off that a particular person was trying to sell on cane. So, the men, threatening violence, drove off to reclaim their bundles saying that they would recognize their cane from the style of knots that they use to tie up the bundles. The tip-off had been correct and the men reclaimed their cane without resorting to violence. Even more so than traps, bundles of cane would be undistinguishable without a marker. Gazsi's team's use of using a certain knot shows a prior awareness that their cane is vulnerable and that an identification marker may well be necessary.



with and who to avoid, are most likely picked up by young children who incorporate it into their own lives (see Bloch, 1971:85-86). This is a hypothesis of socialization based on the fact that at no time did I hear children or adults being formally instructed as to with whom it was and with whom it was not permissible to associate, and on which occasions. Gay Y Blasco (1999a:45) noted that among the *Gitanos* of Spain, children played exclusively with cousins and siblings in their section of the neighbourhood where their relatives lived, much like in Epervár. However, as noted above, the situation is not so severe in Epervár. The fluid notion of *testvér* results in socially acceptable friendships forming between more distant relations.

The social relationship of people is reflected in their greetings to one another. To greet communicates comradeship and to not greet is a way of snubbing. Within the settlement a normal greeting, rather than “Hello!” (*Szia!*), would be the enquiry “Where are you going?” (*Hova mész?*), and this slight exchange of information consolidated a pleasant relationship, just as non-greeting highlighted a non-cooperative relationship. Coming back from the shop with a bulging bag would elicit the question, “What did you buy?” Rather than prying, as I assumed at first, this apparent interest in one another’s business was a standard greeting, and a standard reply would satisfy, “Just bread” a lady with an intriguingly bulging bag answered. Such greetings indicate a degree of care and concern. As an extension of this, close extended family (*testvér*) would always know what their close *testvér* would be up to. Dávid would be heavily queried after his return from visiting Melinda’s sister-in-law, “What was she doing? Cooking? What was she cooking?” This sharing of information, combined with the Romany community ‘rule’ that households could be entered without knocking,<sup>96</sup> created an atmosphere of openness between close *testvér*.

As a newcomer, I was at times given direct instructions and at other times shrouded ones as to with whom it was acceptable to be friends. The instructions I received give great insight into the rules of behaviour in Epervár, consolidated and developed through my observations. For example, I was advised by Katalin’s two

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<sup>96</sup> In practice, close *testvér* are able to walk into and leave each other’s homes with no knocking or greetings, but less closely connected, disputing or non-*testvér* knock or shout to be granted permission to enter. I noticed that children of disputing adult *testvér* refused to enter the houses of their parents’ adversaries. I would leave the children waiting outside while I entered to talk with someone indoors.

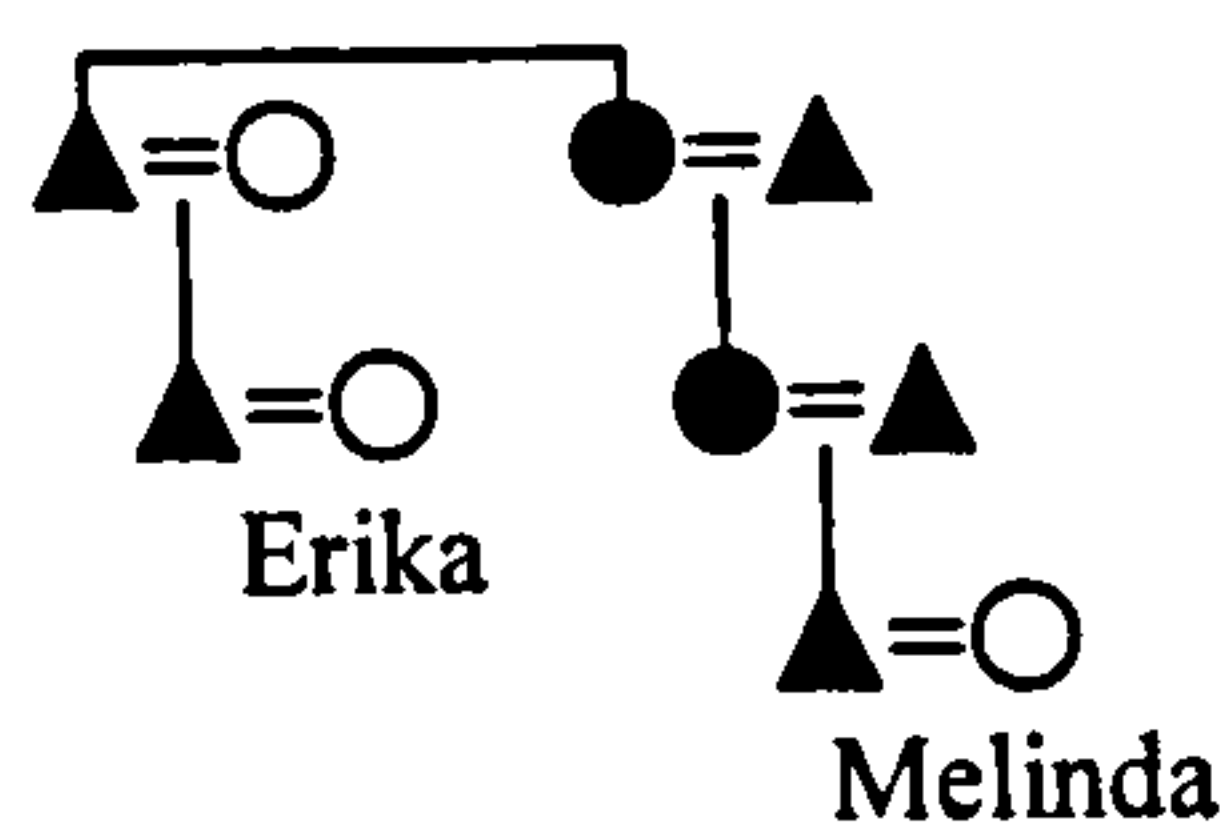


twelve-year-old granddaughters, as we strolled through the settlement, not to “greet everyone”. The two girls conducted themselves with a rather haughty air, deeming some of the children we passed on our walk not worthy of a greeting. Sitting in their yard, which looked on to a busy section of street near the local shop, it was commented that I “greeted all the *Cigány*” while Katalin’s family (*család*) strategically picked to whom they would cheer and wave. One summer month, I was shouted at by the eldest woman of a household who wanted to know why I did not stop and talk to them anymore, why I cycled past, nose in air (she made an impression of me) and ignored them. Melinda, having feuded with this woman’s daughter-in-law, Erika, walked past this house daily and never once exchanged greetings with the family (*család*) members. By not greeting on a constant basis, Melinda continually asserted her distance from this family. By my not greeting, I had inadvertently questioned our relationship. My relationship with Erika’s close family (*család*) suffered because of the feud between Erika and Melinda – loyalties to both were not possible – but I made special efforts to maintain a balanced relationship with a number of other households, despite the pressure from Melinda and László not to do so. If I had restricted my movements and relationships to the extent of Melinda (as she seemed to desire), recognizing her feuds and consolidating them in my own relations, I would have failed to obtain enough research material and led a very unfulfilling existence while living in the village. Gay Y Blasco refers briefly to her similar experiences with Spanish *Gitanos*. “I began to feel constrained by their [the *Gitanos* of the neighbourhood] preference to restrict social interaction to their own kin” (1999a:41-42) and in making friends with a non-kin household found herself ostracized by members of the family she had originally befriended, “They acted coldly towards me, ignoring my greetings when I passed by, no longer inviting me in for a cup of coffee” (1999a:42). In Epervár, all women folk restricted their movements considerably and I, like Gay Y Blasco, was expected to do the same.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> During my fieldwork, there was a high level of hostilities between László’s close *testvér* and Katalin’s close *testvér*, exacerbated by my friendship with both. My friendship with Katalin’s close *testvér* provoked László and Melinda to try various tactics to disturb that relationship. For example, László once discredited Katalin’s close *testvér* by saying that Katalin’s son-in-law had told the police where potato thieves had stashed their loot – a sin within the community as to steal food to feed a hungry family is seen as morally permissible, and to tell the police on fellow Roma in such cases is viewed as a betrayal. During my stay, accusations got wilder, accumulating in members of László’s close *testvér* network going to Katalin’s house threatening physical violence if a bike that they were accused of stealing, belonging to István’s wife, was not returned. In this case, I was sent as mediator, with the message from Katalin that her five strong men were not afraid





Visiting homes was a part of daily life for women. The same women would visit the same households every day. In this way, there was a very small circulation of people. The routine in both Melinda's and Katalin's households were very similar. The men would be outdoors,<sup>98</sup> often working, and the women would remain indoors cooking, cleaning and visiting each other. During the day, Melinda would be visited at some point by her sister-in-law, mother-in-law and two nieces. They would take a chair, smoke cigarettes, and exchange news. Later, Melinda would stroll down to the corner to her sister-in-law's house where the mother-in-law and another niece would be, and slow-paced conversations would continue. Katalin's house was always the centre of her close *testvér* gatherings. Every day, her daughter and daughter-in-law would visit in a similar atmosphere to that at Melinda's: household chores, relaxed socializing and cigarettes – the everyday, amiable interaction of close female *testvér*.

The following small exchange illustrates the ambiguous and ill-defined line between non-greeting and hostile relations. One particular family (*család*) was bad-mouthed by both Barbara, a friend, and Melinda (neither Melinda nor Barbara ordinarily consider themselves *testvér* and so looked down on each other,<sup>99</sup> but even in crisis situations neither Barbara nor Melinda were considered *testvér* of the bad-mouthed family (*család*)). This family (*család*) was said to be "dirty" (*piszkos*), a common and damning insult within the village, stemming from the ideology of the paramount importance of cleanliness. Barbara said that they had

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to fight. Katalin's close *testvér* had privately ridiculed the threat of physical violence from a one-legged man confined to a wheelchair as pathetic. They would not hit him, but "send him away", said the men.

<sup>98</sup> László, due to his disability, remained indoors more often than other men his age.

<sup>99</sup> At the time of a funeral and when it was first explained to me by both László and Ödön that I was free to be friends with Ödön's family, both men individually explained their *testvér* connections (Ödön is László's grand-mother's brother) and therefore, in certain situations, Melinda and Barbara would be *testvér* through marriage (Barbara is married to Ödön's son).

once lived by her as neighbours and that they had thrown their rubbish outside and generally made a mess of their outdoor living space. One day as we neared the family (*család*), gathered as usual outside a house, sitting on the grassy-banked ditch and talking, Barbara urged me to hide the small paper bag of biscuits (*sütemény*) that I had just bought from the shop in her baby's pram, "otherwise they'll want them from you", she urged. So, the bag was hidden and we walked on past. Returning back the same way minutes later I was aggressively shouted at, "So, you think we would just want your biscuits? Are you too proud for us now?" A woman, *testvér* to this family (*család*), had been walking behind us and had overheard Barbara and told them of our exchange. There was no lasting damage to my relationship with this family (*család*) from this episode, but for Barbara, their retorts simply consolidated her contempt for them and she angrily called them names as we returned to her house. Despite having to walk past this family group, a large and self-confident female-dominated crowd, several times every day in order to visit her parents-in-law, Barbara maintained a hostile relationship with this family (*család*).

## 2 Crisis Situations and Hostilities

As a new-comer and pseudo member of one particular family (*család*), Melinda and László's, I was regularly given specific instructions in regard to social decorum which prove useful in gaining an insight into the rules and norms of close family (*család*) responses and extended family (*testvér*) interaction in crisis situations.

One such crisis arose when László's thirteen-year-old cousin was beaten by her ex-boyfriend for going to a disco with another young man, and afterwards tried to commit suicide, resulting in her becoming very ill. She fell off the bed after overdosing, her mother heard the thump and so was alerted to the situation. The local doctor was called out and treated the girl at home over the following few days. The incident was reported to the police, and I later accompanied the girl to the Szilvaszék police station to where she had been summoned to give her statement. In response to the ex-boyfriend's attack, the same night the girl's brother retaliated by beating up the offending ex-boyfriend. This male cousin of László's was then under threat from the beaten boy's extended male family members who



said that they would seek revenge on the beaten girl's brother. Afterwards, this cousin no longer daily visited Melinda and László as he had done before the incident because, according to Melinda, his route involved cycling past the ex-boyfriend's house and he was too afraid to do so.

In fact I heard different versions of events – rumours that the ex-boyfriend was wearing glasses to hide his eyes after a gang of *Magyar* boys sprayed aerosol in his face and stories that the cousin was no longer visiting László for other reasons – but the version of events that Melinda and László imparted to me was the one outlined above. László's male cousin had rightly defended his sister. The threats from the ex-boyfriend's *testvér* were unacceptable, according to Melinda, as the nephew, as a diabetic, was not a fair target for assault. His diabetes meant that it was not allowed to physically assault him and if the threats were acted upon, László would defend his cousin.

It was indirectly let known that it was my obligation, as a quasi-member of László and Melinda's close family (*család*), to support their *testvér* network during this crisis and therefore avoid the ex-boyfriend's *testvér*. Later, talking on the street to a male friend, I gathered I was making some sort of error because of the knife-like look that Melinda shot me as she proudly and territorially entered László's aunt's house with other concerned visiting female *testvér*. As Melinda would never have ordinarily spoken to any of the people out on the street, her not greeting these people was not noticeable, her snubbing of me, however, was unusual. Wondering what I was doing to deserve this disapproval, it was only later that I learnt that the young man I was talking to was considered to be *testvér* to the ex-boyfriend. Likewise Katalin's son-in-law, Gazsi, was related, *testvér*, to the ex-boyfriend, Melinda maintained, and so was in effect one of the men threatening László's nephew with violence. In this case, Melinda explicitly informed me that I should have no further contact with this member of Katalin's *testvér* network, and the picture was painted of Katalin's *testvér* network being the bully boys threatening the nephew with violence. Melinda deliberately emphasized the link between the ex-boyfriend, Gazsi and Katalin. My loyalties should lie with László and Melinda's family (*család*) and this should be reflected in my social interactions – I should be loyal to their *testvér* network and that implies ceasing all interaction with other *testvér* members.



Similar events unfolded following an accident involving Melinda and László's six-year-old son. He was sold a firework by a member of the community. The boy was instructed to light it, but did not let it go, instead holding it in his hand near his leg as the fuse burnt down, and it finally exploded in his clutch. The result was a deep wound to his thigh, but, afraid of his father's reaction, he told no one about what had happened. It was only three days later, when the cut had become infected, that his mother discovered the wound, and he was taken to hospital to be treated. It was a worrying time for László and Melinda. If the boy had been holding the firework near his face the consequences would have been far more serious. The incident was reported to the police, as it is illegal to sell fireworks to children. A couple of months later, we travelled to Debrecen for the boy to give evidence to a police doctor, but nothing further was heard of the incident while I was still in the village. Following the incident, I was explicitly told by Melinda to avoid the man who had sold the firework to her son. This time the instructions were very clear and pointed – I was not to talk to this man or his close family (*család*) as it was due to him that her son was badly injured, yet fortunately not more seriously so.

Supporting members of your network is the basis for these hostile relations. However, such support at times takes a more gentle form too. László had no regular interaction with his second-cousin-once-removed, Albert, and his household. However, one day, the three-year-old daughter of Albert was reluctantly eating at László and Melinda's kitchen table. As she sat with downcast eyes, László encouraged her to cheer up and eat up. The day before, Albert had had a fight with his wife and had hit her. In response, the wife left for Budapest to stay with her relatives. Albert, sorry for his actions and determined to get his wife back, pursued her to the capital, leaving their children alone. Their three sons were old enough to take care of themselves in their parents' absence, but the youngest child needed cared for and so László had offered to help as he could. With the girl mournful and clearly not interested in eating, Melinda said that she should just be taken home. "No", countered László, "I told Albert that she would eat here, so she will". This episode was a crisis for Albert's close family (*család*) and so the support network of extended family (*testvér*), of which László is a member, pulled together and fulfilled their obligations.



### 3 Fluid/Constructed Nature of *Testvér*

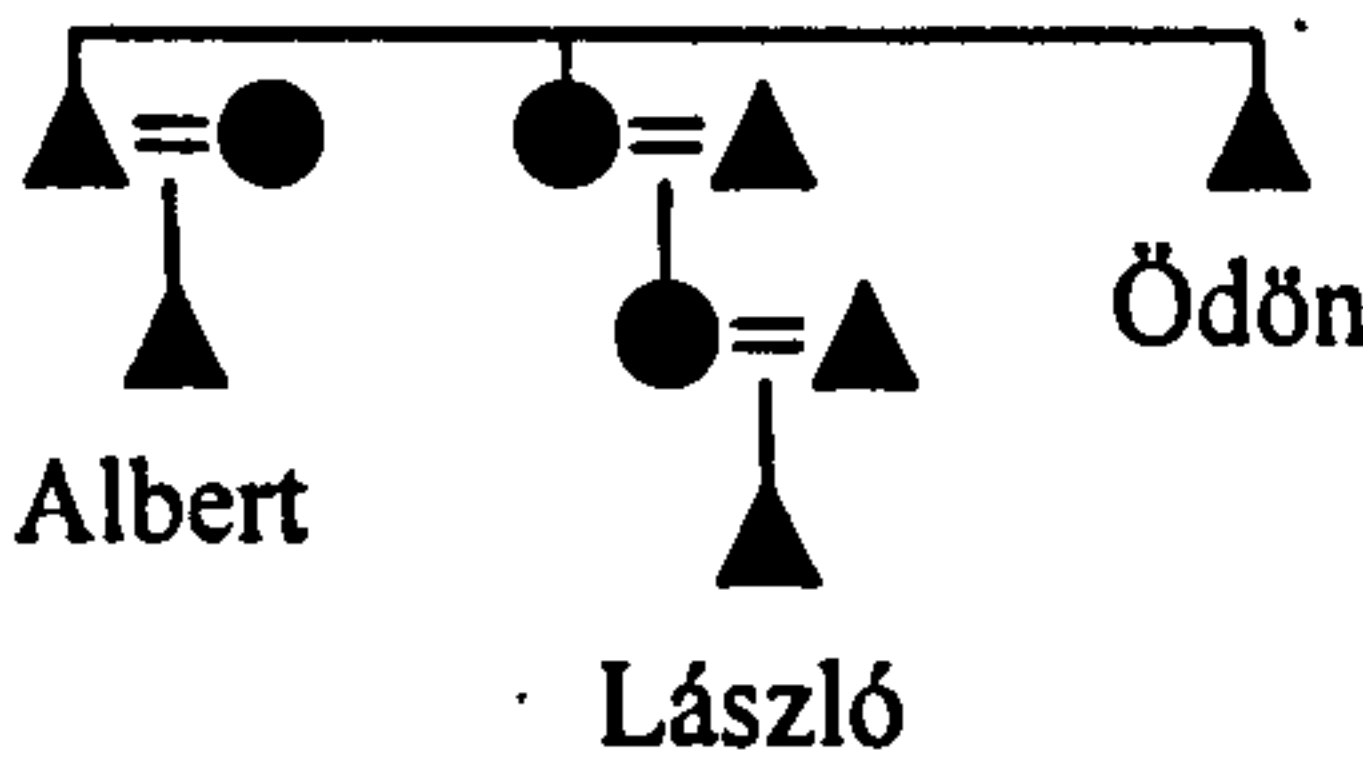
As we shall see, *testvér* bonds are to an extent constructed and fluid notions. Depending on the situation, different relations are emphasized and drawn upon. It can be perceived as a series of overlapping categories, which conjoin or move apart depending on the situation. *Testvér* is expressed and interpreted according to situation. The moral aspect of the concept is encapsulated in László and Melinda's discouragement in my befriending certain households in that they justified their instructions by drawing on the theme that to be 'dirty' is socially and morally unacceptable. Several times I was warned by László and Melinda not to sit on the seats of one particular household (Erika's, with whom Melinda and László were feuding) as I could get fleas, "They are dirty". I was also urged not to eat there either, and when I did get a stomach upset, it was decided by Melinda and László that I "must have eaten at theirs", despite the fact that I had not eaten there at all. László and Melinda once listed in which houses I could eat; ones they deemed clean. All the households of their close *testvér* were, naturally, acceptable. In fact, the importance of cleanliness meant that house interiors were rarely dirty. Despite the difficult conditions (cold water, no proper mop, many dirty shoes), women made every effort to keep all the house surfaces clear and clean. The social stigma attached to the concept of "dirty" and the open house policy meant that the inside of houses had to be constantly at a high standard of cleanliness. László and Melinda's definitions were therefore arbitrary. To be *testvér* was to be morally sound, and therefore clean; to be non-*testvér* was to be morally suspect, and therefore dirty.

Without drawing directly on the theme of dirt (morality), nor indeed offering any explanation as to why it be so, László used the concept of *testvér* to instruct me as to which people I should feel free to associate with as a pseudo-member of his family (*család*).<sup>100</sup> For example, the man who made the brooms, Ödön, often called me into his yard, where I would spend pleasant hours with his family (*család*) listening to music or talking with them as food was prepared. During this time, he would repeatedly tell me that he and László were *testvér* through László's mother. I never saw interaction between these two close family (*család*) groups. László's family (*család*) had no need to walk down the road on which Ödön's family hung out, and so the family members did not even greet one another. And

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<sup>100</sup> At times, László proudly proclaimed to his *testvér* that I was like a daughter to him.

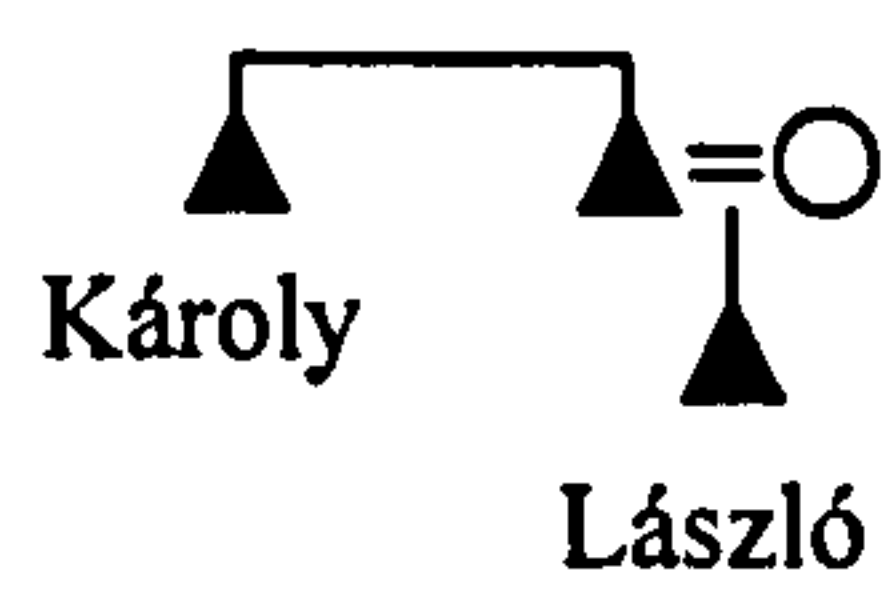
on occasion when they did walk past when I was present, perhaps to vary the usual route to the local shop, there were no greetings exchanged. I came to become friends with both Ödön's close family and László's close family, but at no point to my knowledge, did representatives of these two families (*család*) socially interact. However, László, on hearing that I had befriended this family (*család*) assured me that Ödön was a relative, a member of his extended family (*testvér*) network, and therefore approved of my association with his close family (*család*). Ödön was László's grandmother's brother (and uncle to Albert). Sitting in Ödön's yard was a public statement and László acted upon the information that I had been welcomed by this close family, shown by my sitting in their yard, to assure me that this bond was 'allowed'.



In contrast to László sanctioning my friendship with Ödön's close family (*család*) by referring to their "*testvér*" bonds, László denied his relatedness on another occasion – showing his disapproval of this particular friendship of mine. During my fieldwork, I grew very close to Katalin's family (*család*). During one of my first visits, one of the family (*család*) members, a fostered man, Károly, told me that he was a relative of László's. "Ask László" he urged me, seeking approval for our friendship. After hearing this a few times from Károly, I asked László if it was correct, as Károly had said, that he and Károly were in fact *testvér*. László answered negatively. "He is a Mezei [surname] and so am I, but there are loads of Mezei in Epervár. We are not really relatives". In this case, Károly had wanted to reassure me (and himself) that our friendship was safe and allowed through his connection to László, and that László would sanction it. He had used his *testvér* ties to László to verify our new friendship. However, with Károly living as a member of Katalin's household, performing the role as member of her close *testvér* network, László felt that Károly was not a member of his close *testvér* network. He also wanted to distance himself from Katalin and discourage my relationship with her close family (*család*). As far as László was concerned, he



and Károly were not *testvér*. Refuting Károly’s claim that they were “*testvér*”, László was pushing Károly away and not allowing him access into his *testvér* network and the benefits that would bring him – in this particular case, a sanctioned friendship with me. In fact, compiling László’s family tree revealed that László was Károly’s nephew.



In contrast to Katalin encouraging my relationship with her close *testvér* network, Katalin herself had a reputation for distancing herself from the settlement inhabitants. She did this by strategically distancing herself from her wider *testvér* by ignoring and snubbing her links with them, and refusing to create new ones (see the example below of her interference in her son’s planned marriage).

Katalin’s close *testvér* group were an adopted son, her three other sons who lived in the village, her daughter, her daughter’s husband, and her daughter-in-law.<sup>101</sup> This group regularly worked and socialized together, congregating at Katalin’s house every day. The men would meet there in the mornings before going out working and return there in the evenings, sometimes washing there, before heading home to eat. As we saw above, Katalin’s daughter and daughter-in-law, if not employed that day, would visit the home to amiably spend some time in each other’s company. Additionally, they would all sometimes eat together at her house, the women-folk cook together there, and the men use her home as the base for recreational fishing activities. Despite the fact that the older children had households of their own, Katalin’s house remained the focal point of the close *testvér*’s activities. As Katalin said of her daughter’s daily visits, “If it is raining or snowing or there is a terrible storm, Zita will still come here”.

<sup>101</sup> It is notable that one of Katalin’s daughter-in-laws never once visited Katalin, despite living two houses away. It was never spoken of, but there was no relationship between these women, despite the fact that Katalin’s grandchild from this marriage was frequently at her grandmother’s (Katalin’s).

Katalin's household had moved outside the settlement (although, only to its borders) in 1984. Katalin's close *testvér* were in the contradictory position of being both very proud of their "non-*Cigány*" attributes, while also being stoutly proud of their "*Cigány*" identity. As the two granddaughters practiced their dance routine for a coming school performance, Károly remarked how no other Romany children would practice and rehearse like they were, while at the same time attributing their great skill at dancing to their *Cigány* status. To further complicate matters, Katalin is a successful entrepreneur who provides casual labour to a significant number of Roma in the village. Her 'dual identity' that allows her privileged access into both the *Magyar* and *Cigány* worlds partially explains her business success. This background is the context in which Katalin's, her close family and close *testvér* position themselves within the community.

This decision by Katalin to somewhat distance her close *testvér* from daily settlement life meant that throughout the settlement, they were frequently dismissed as "proud, haughty or arrogant" (*büszke*) – an insult. Even Katalin's brother-in-law (Katalin's deceased husband's brother), living in a similarly grand house further from the settlement, themselves described Katalin as "*büszke*". "She's too proud to greet us", they commented. Plucking chickens, an elderly lady from another household explained how her daughter had been the partner of Zoltán (Katalin's son) as a girl, but that Katalin had disallowed the relationship, "preferring instead that Romanian girl [Donata, Zoltán's wife]" scoffed the lady, "and what's going on there? Eight years and no children?" Ambivalent feelings towards Katalin and her close *testvér* existed, and were encouraged to an extent as they enjoyed to be distanced from settlement life. For example, Katalin would never attend the *Cigány* Balls, rhetorically asking, "Why would we go? What are we? *Cigány*?"

### **3.1 Fostering, Marriage, Divorce and Re-marriage**

In the following section, I will address the issue of rejection from, and inclusion into, *testvér* networks. How do people become *testvér*? Using László as the ego of a network, I shall look at how he rejects one of his uncles from his network, but finds himself similarly rejected from a second uncle's own *testvér* network. To understand more fully the fluid and constructed nature of *testvér*, I then turn to the other instances of inclusion and exclusion, looking at the various responses to ex-



spouses and their children as a medium for trying to understand the constructed element of *testvér*. As we saw above, relations between uncle and nephew can be denied, and in the same vein, those relationships formed and constructed through trust and mutual obligation take precedence. The all-encompassing nature of relations in Epervár, with the high level of family branches inter-marrying, means that theoretically one can claim to be *testvér* to a wide range of people. Who one chooses to call one's *testvér* therefore has to do with personal relationships: to a large degree, closeness – relatedness – is constructed (see Katalin's comments below).

The complexities of *testvér* really came to the surface when I attempted to compile the family trees of the people I had got to know the most.<sup>102</sup> As I questioned people, the intriguing element was the number of mixed messages I received. Just as László denied his relationship to Károly, so other people told me different 'facts'. One of Károly's father's brothers was dead, Károly assured me as we wrote down his uncles and aunts. I approached Károly's sister, (one of twelve – all of who had become separated after the death of their parents) who again produced conflicting information. "*Bolond*", a fool, was what she said of Károly (an affectionate, common insult in Epervár) as she corrected Károly's version of their family tree. That uncle, according to her, was not dead but was living out towards the city of Nyiregyháza. That very same man, as far as I could work out, was actually living in a house in the settlement – at least that is who he claimed to be! At nearly every step of the investigation, I was thrown another contradictory relationship. Who one considers *testvér* is open to many interpretations. For instance, László repeatedly failed to tell me about *testvér* who were so physically or mentally sick that they were living in care homes. He also discounted *testvér* who were not living in Epervár. By not taking part in settlement life, performing kinship, constructing relatedness through action, these people were no longer part of László's consciousness.

Károly and his siblings' lack of consensus on their siblings may be explained by the fact that they had been orphaned as children, and in consequence the younger family members were fostered by different families (*család*). Some of the siblings

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<sup>102</sup> It was only when compiling the family tree that I realized that all my substantial relationships were with members of one *testvér* network.



had lost contact, moved away or died, and of those that remained in the village, Károly and his sister had established themselves as members of different close *testvér* networks. Such fostering following a child being orphaned or abandoned is the usual response to this rare occurrence. It is not an official or legal agreement, but ensures that the child is properly cared for. For example, Laszlo's mother had cared for her nineteen-year-old grandson since his mother died and his father moved to Canada with their two older children.

László further emphasized the constructed notion of *testvér* in discussions of his uncles. One uncle, Jancsi, lived with his family (*család*) at a central corner house, next door to his sister and opposite his brother. While László enjoyed relations with Jancsi's brother and sister, he deliberately had no relationship with Jancsi himself. László, while conceding that this man was formally *testvér*, explained that they had no bonds of trust or respect. These had been severed following the death of László's grandfather (Jancsi's father) when Jancsi took land that László believed should have been allocated to him. László chose to disassociate himself from his uncle Jancsi, no longer considering him *testvér* in everyday interactions. Interestingly, László found himself in a similar position to his uncle Jancsi as another uncle, who had prospered and moved to Debrecen, occasionally returning to Epervár in his black Mercedes to visit his *testvér*, pointedly did not visit László. This uncle did not make the journey past his brother's, Jancsi's, house and in doing so, demonstrated that, for him, László was no longer *testvér*. László was hurt and puzzled by this rejection, claiming that he had never done anything to hurt (*bántani*) this uncle. Considered together, these examples are interesting as they highlight situations when people disagree about whom they consider to be in their own *testvér* network. This interpretative and constructed aspect of *testvér* is considered further in the following section.

Marriage in the Epervár Romany community is an expression of love between two people, and the basic foundation of households.<sup>103</sup> In this section, I explore marriage from the perspective that it is an important aspect of relatedness. In this context, marriage is more than a union of two people in love (the Romany idealized version), but rather an approved joining of two networks. While men

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<sup>103</sup> There are a couple of single parent households in the settlement. In both cases, the man had left his family and the woman continued to bring up their children alone. The support of extended family is even more important in such circumstances.



and women refer to one another as husband (*férj*) and wife (*feleség*), most of these relationships are consensual unions rather than official marriages. An estimated 90% of local Romany couples live together without being legally married. “It is not paper that connects two people, but love”, is one local take on this. However, a more practical explanation offered is the high cost of marriage ceremonies. It is interesting to contrast this with Durst’s case study (2002) where most couples officially marry once they are eighteen-years-old to for the sake of their children and the authorities. Although she too notes that without these pressures, her informants would not choose to marry (2002:29). As the Epervár consensual relationships are locally referred to in marriage terms, I shall use such terminology here.

There is a romantic notion among the Roma that their capacity to love is more passionate than the *Magyars*. Katalin qualified her position, however, by explaining that she did not really know what the *Magyars* did. While she felt that in comparison to the *Magyars*, the *Cigány* are more demonstrative and impassioned in their love lives, she declared that she had no evidence to support this idea, having never gained intimate access to this aspect of *Magyar* culture. Many Roma are married more than once, and often the first unions are to *Magyars*. These relationships rarely last however, and the second marriage is then usually between two *Cigánys*. One of the explanations for this is that non-Roma cannot cope with the poverty of the Romany marital lifestyle. Another is that the Roma, passionate and motivated by desire, will not stay in an unsatisfactory relationship. Orsolya’s apparently sudden eviction from her marital home to be replaced by a ‘wife’ from another village, illustrates the temporal and passionate aspect to such unions. However, this romantic notion of unions is somewhat contradicted by incidents of interference in relationships and attempts to arrange marriages. Normally, parents must approve relationships before a marriage can go ahead, although there have been instances of lovers fleeing together and seeking refuge with more distant relatives, calculating that eventually their union will be accepted. Disapproval of relationships stems from such factors as the proposed spouse being poor or having been involved in theft.

Katalin played a dominant role in her own children’s relationships, for example, it was said that she ended her son’s, Zoltán’s, relationship with a local Romany



young woman, leaving the woman's family bitter at this slighting. One explanation for Katalin's disapproval in this instance is related to the young woman's close family's (*család*) perceived lower social and economic status. The status of the family (*család*) and the close *testvér* is an important factor in assessing the suitability of potential spouses as marriage is more than a bond between two individuals, but an important connection between two networks. Zoltán, however, went on to marry, to Katalin's approval, a relatively impoverished ethnic Hungarian Rom from Transylvania. Donata, Zoltán's wife, initially travelled to Epervár for work reasons, before settling in the village to set up home with Zoltán. Donata has become a deeply embedded member of Katalin's network. For Donata's close family (*család*) the connection is a very profitable one as members regularly travel from Romania to work with Katalin's work team. There is permanently one or other of Donata's close relatives staying with her to take advantage of the opportunity to work and the relatively high Hungarian wages. In this way, Katalin gained access to a large and willing workforce of Romanian *Romungro*. She also gained a docile and kind daughter-in-law who presented no potential local problems in terms of future allegiance in dispute situations. I would suggest that this was Katalin's main impetus in approving her son's relationship with Donata. Katalin is very protective of her family in respect to sheltering them from dispute situations. For example, her explanation for not becoming more involved in local politics is that she does not want her family (*család*) to be subjected to the disputes and tensions that taking part in local politics would entail. In sharp contrast to Katalin's embracement of Donata, was Katalin's rejection of one other son's wife. Living only two doors away and the mother of a much-loved grandchild, it was as if this daughter-in-law did not exist. She came from the near-by town of Almásut and remained in close contact with her close family (*család*) there, travelling to work as a cleaner in the town. Her close family (father, brothers and sister) often visited, and sometimes the men would go out to work together in their own team. Katalin's children would occasionally visit the daughter-in-law's house, but as far as Katalin was concerned, it was as if this daughter-in-law did not exist. Katalin would ask her granddaughter what she had eaten, and offer her food, and Katalin's son would spend time in her house and frequently eat there, but the daughter-in-law was never mentioned and never visited. I did build a relationship with the daughter-in-law, but felt quite suffocated by the attention I received and their rather



frightening insistence of my presence in their home. I was never able to find out what had caused the rift between Katalin and this daughter-in-law. The most striking feature of this non-relationship is the contrasting, apparently 'natural' inclusive atmosphere in Katalin's home. Seeing this hostile relationship, enables one to appreciate the constructed and deliberate aspect to these relationships – apparently built on passionate love.

Another story of parental mediation in relationships involves the abortion of an arranged marriage to be replaced by the union of two teenagers in love. Fourteen-year-old Bence's father, Pál, is a prosperous Epervár entrepreneur whose family (*család*) lives in relative luxury: "Inside their house is like a film", admired my friend who had once been invited indoors. Pál and his wife had arranged for a fitting union between their son and a young woman from Szilvaszék from an equally affluent family (*család*). However, part-way into the wedding arrangements, it was discovered that Maria, who had been dating Bence for over a year, was pregnant with his child. As she came from a much poorer family (*család*), there was a crisis as Maria's and Bence's parents considered their options. Maria had kept her pregnancy a secret for seven months, afraid of the reaction of her parents, and it was therefore too late for her to have an abortion. After much deliberation and soul-searching, Bence's parents decided that Maria's child would be treated as their grandchild and called the wedding off, deciding instead to support their new extended family. With the baby only a few months old, Bence was a regular visitor to Maria's home to visit his child and bring it to play at his family home. The baby's toys and equipment were bright, new and modern, in contrast to the worn and drab interior of Maria's family home, as Bence's parents were determined to provide the best for their first grandchild. This story illustrates the kinds of issues that are considered in the creation of unions and comment on the role of all interested partners: potential spouses and their parents.

Looking at the relations between husbands and wives, ex-spouses, and their respective children provides an insight into the variety of responses available to these actors in terms of *testvér* allegiance. Many men were on their second or third marriages, having fathered children with their previous spouses. Unlike the tactic of avoidance as practiced by the Vlach Roma of Stewart's study (1997) where



former spouses deliberately break all relations, Epervár Roma appear to practice no such thing. There existed feelings of anger, jealousy and resentment, as one would expect, but avoidance was not a tool employed to harmonize the situation. I was told of there having been a physical fight out on the street as a woman attacked her husband's lover – a neighbour. In such a small, interdependent community, enemies, friends and lovers were all in close proximity to one another and have to learn to cope. Zita, Gazsi's common-in-law-wife, left her first husband for Gazsi and Gazsi left his first wife for Zita. "We greet one another when we pass on the street", said Zita explaining the improved relationship between her and Gazsi's ex-wife after ten years of them being together.

László enjoyed a close, warm relationship with Melinda's two sons from her first marriage. Young men living in Szilvaszék, there was no animosity between them and László when they visited their mother. In contrast, Melinda resented László's twin daughters from his second marriage. The girls very occasionally stayed in Epervár as their aunt was László's sister-in-law (who lived next door to László).<sup>104</sup> On such occasions, Melinda was unfriendly towards the girls. It could be argued that, for László, Melinda's sons had become his *testvér*, but for Melinda, László's daughters would never become her *testvér*.

In another case, one of Áron's ex-wives (and the mother of his child) lives with Áron's parents and plays a prominent role in all aspects of the household. She collects sticks from which Ödön makes his brooms, she cooks, she cleans – she is a member of that household. A five-minute walk away at the end of one of the roads that stops at the cane, lives Áron, his wife Barbara and their baby son. Barbara has close relations to Áron's parents, but is often in her house watching television with only her son for company and cooking for her small close family; the relationship between Áron's parents and Áron's ex-wife appears to be closer. However, relations between them all are good. Once, Áron's five-year-old daughter from this previous marriage (Áron claimed that Barbara was his third wife) burst into Barbara's home and planted a kiss on Barbara's lips, as she liked to do. The mother came in behind, delivering a message from Áron's parents, and a brief conversation between the two women followed. Once they had left, Barbara rolled her eyes and, making a face of disgust, said, "I know what you are

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<sup>104</sup> László and his brother Zsolt had married sisters.



thinking, Fran” (and she was right), “I hate her”. But evidence suggested there was in fact a much more complex relationship at play. On the evening of the five-year-old daughter’s birthday, both ladies came round to my house to collect me for the party. “I’ve brought her to see your house. She’s never seen it before”, said Barbara, walking in with Áron’s former wife before the three of us set off to celebrate. A hostile relationship may be considered natural, but these two women had reached an understanding. Circumstances dictated that they remain in close contact and cooperate, so that is what they were doing.

István (one of László’s brother) had fathered three children with his first wife, but she had left him while he was serving a four year prison sentence, leaving István’s mother to bring up the three young children for a while.<sup>105</sup> István’s fifteen-year-old daughter (the youngest of the three from his first marriage), Kitti, had a three-year-old son and gave birth to her second child while I was in the village. Kitti lived in a room of a house with her husband and children, sharing the kitchen facilities and the bathroom with her father, István’s second wife, Rózsi, and their three young children who lived in their own room of the house. Rózsi was twenty-six, and with her young children, fell into the same generation as István’s daughter – despite the fact that Rózsi was officially Kitti’s mother-in-law. While István and his son-in-law made a good team, selling corn together, hamstering together, going recreational fishing together, there was a level of animosity between the women. Kitti would frequently complain about Rózsi’s behaviour when visiting Melinda. On one occasion, the complaint surrounded what food Rózsi had bought that morning. The fruits of her shopping trip were discussed, focusing on the fact that she had bought convenience foods of rolls and salami, sweets for the children and a cola drink – luxurious items. Later Rózsi came into Melinda’s house where her shopping expedition had earlier been unfavourably discussed, and Melinda, feigning ignorant innocence, asked Rózsi what she had bought that day. Rózsi told her, adding “I didn’t feel like cooking today”. Such behaviour placed Rózsi in the category of “*lusta*”, lazy, an insult to women whose role was to provide for husband and children and carry out these duties unwaveringly. Admitting to laziness, as Rózsi had done, showed a real brazenness and lack of shame – or

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<sup>105</sup> In the telling of these events there was no judgement made by István’s mother against the wife that abandoned her husband and children while her husband was serving time in prison, in contrast to Fonseca’s account that a wife leaving her husband while he is in prison is the ultimate crime within the Romany community (1995).



thoughtlessness. Despite Rózsi being a member of the close network of women *testvér* who visited each other daily, despite her sharing and swapping food with Melinda and accompanying Melinda to the hospital when László was operated on, she was often spoken of disrespectfully behind her back by other female members of the close *testvér* group. Back-stabbing was common among the women folk, but Rózsi suffered from it the most – at least in my hearing. “*Kurva*” (prostitute) was how László’s mother, Rózsi’s mother-in-law, described Rózsi in her account of her own life story. “And she is a little *kurva* too”, the mother-in-law said, motioning to Rózsi’s three-year-old daughter sitting with us. With no affection in the delivery of this, it was an insult.<sup>106</sup> The perception that Rózsi was a bad mother had implications for her close *testvér*. Melinda’s refusal to walk with Rózsi’s children to the local shop as she was “ashamed” (*szégyel*) has to do with Melinda’s fear of being ‘tarred with the same brush’ as Rózsi. As *testvér*, it was a shame for Melinda that Rózsi’s children were so unkempt.

#### 4 Zsivány and Trust

Inter-related with this style of interaction is a fundamental concept in the world-view of Epervár Roma: that of people being inherently predisposed to act in a deceitful manner. Along with the local idiom of relatedness and its tactical and moral connotations, the tendency for Epervár *Cigány* to distrust a fellow Rom’s, or non-Rom’s, motivations, and to react in turn by ignoring the person who is perceived to have wronged you, is a defining characteristic of Epervár social life. The concepts of extended family (*testvér*) and crooked (*zsivány*) behaviour are concretely related as there is a tendency to distrust more distant *testvér* and non-

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<sup>106</sup> “*Kurva*” (prostitute) was a term often used affectionately within the community (as opposed to wider Hungarian society where no such usage would ever take place, “*kurva*” only ever describing a disapproved of occupation or being part of a common swearword, “*kurva anyád*” (motherfucker)). One young boy, on returning home from nursery school, asked his mother for his “little prostitute”, *kis kurvám*. A battered little teddy was found for him. His “*kis kurva*”, his aunt laughed, turning to me with only a very slight explanatory attitude. Photographing a month old baby as a favour for a family, the husband and father took some of the photographs himself. Leaning close to the naked baby girl he urged and coaxed her, “Little *kurva*”. This time there was absolutely no indication that this was even slightly odd. “*Kurva*”, like “*testvér*”, is a word with a different significance and meaning within the community compared to wider Hungarian society, and is used in different contexts accordingly. Similarly to this ambiguous use of the word *kurva*, to complain “How bad my children are” as they played noisily was often really a declaration of deep affection. At times *kurva* was used with the intention to insult. On such occasions, it was an offensive damning of a woman’s character, questioning her morality and behaviour. It was utilized as a way of curbing women’s behaviour as they did not want to be seen, or spoken of, as being a “*kurva*”.



*testvér* – believing that they will act in a crooked way towards you. These two, inter-related concepts have important implications for outside agencies, such as the Dignity Foundation, which are working towards building local civic associations based on trust.

*Zsivány* is a Hungarian word, translated in mainstream discourse as ‘rascal’, with connotations of a Robin Hood type figure. The word is rarely used in mainstream *Magyar* discourse but, like the word ‘*testvér*’ and ‘dirty’ (*piszkos*), has been adopted and imbued with particular connotations by the Epervár Roma. To be ‘*piszkos*’ is to be morally questionable, to be ‘*testvér*’ is to be trusted and to be ‘*zsivány*’ is to be crooked and untrustworthy. Within the Epervár Romany community *zsivány* is a common, slanderous, insult used in a number of different contexts, but almost always with malicious intent. Usually it does not have the light-hearted, slightly cheeky connotations that the English word ‘rascal’ does, but is associated with meanness and bad intent. As we shall see, *zsivány* is a characteristic of human nature. Everyone has the capacity to be *zsivány*. The concept is used to explain behaviour and situations, and is a way of understanding negative actions and attributes.

To accuse someone of being *zsivány* (crooked) is the common way of denouncing that individual’s character. One should not have things to do with (*foglalkozni*) *zsivány* people, but rather maintain a healthy social distance in terms of greeting them, engaging in conversation with them, entering their household and working with them. To not associate with *zsivány* people is therefore a mechanism of avoiding conflict. I asked people who claimed to have been affected by *zsivány* behaviour exactly how they felt about being subject to such contemptible conduct. Acceptance of the situation and avoidance of the perpetrators were the two responses. There was no talk of revenge, nor anger, but rather a nonchalant acceptance.

Here follows snapshots of situations when *zsivány* was used in order to demonstrate the myriad of contexts the word can be used in and illuminate its meaning.

Six-year-old Dávid shouted at his mother, “You’re *zsivány*!”, after she refused to give him money to go card playing with. This was a rather hollow last retort, thrown at Melinda, in desperation and anger. László’s description of his wife as crooked, “Melinda was a little *zsivány*, wasn’t she?”, referred to earlier, highlights the ambivalence that László felt towards his wife’s actions.<sup>107</sup> László could recognize his wife’s crooked behaviour and was able to comment on it as it was my last day in the field. No one is exempt from being *zsivány* as these two examples involving close family (*család*) demonstrate. Husbands accuse wives and sons accuse mothers demonstrating that even the most close family relationships can be affected by this crooked behaviour.

Beyond the close family (*család*), but among extended family (*testvér*), the accusation of *zsivány* is more common. Melinda would gossip and complain that her mother-in-law was “*zsivány*”. Warning me to be wary of her, Melinda said that one of her tricks was to moan about her ill health and poverty in the hope that Melinda would feel sympathetic and offer her a meal. This trickery, for an example an appearance of friendship while really deceiving to gain at another’s expense, is one of the crucial aspects of *zsivány* behaviour. If I had been talking to Melinda’s mother-in-law, Melinda would question me – demanding to know what she had wanted. While Melinda was warning me against her *zsivány* mother-in-law, the mother-in-law was issuing me exactly the same warning about Melinda. She told me to be careful; that Melinda was *zsivány*. Interestingly, the two women used the same argument to complain about each other while László was sick. The mother-in-law said that Melinda was not feeding László properly. To combat his perceived bad diet she would bring plates of food to László. At the same time, Melinda complained that the mother-in-law was doing nothing to help – not even providing food for her son. Melinda complained that she was taking the full burden of László’s illness. Who was, and who was not, providing László with a balanced diet became the medium of expressing mutual dislike – and both women accused the other of being *zsivány* for failing in their duties.

Between non-*testvér* and more distant *testvér*, there is a greater degree of mistrust. Non-*testvér* were frequently accused of being *zsivány* in gossip conversations

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<sup>109</sup> As my guardian, Melinda tricked money from me in several ways over the course of my time in the village. It was not just László who commented on his wife’s behaviour, but friends of mine (non-*család*) also sympathetically remarked on her being *zsivány*.



within households. The womenfolk who visited each other on a daily basis exchanged stories of *zsivány* characters – from the Romanian potato merchants who cheated Melinda by selling her a bag of rotten potatoes from the boot of their car, to the neighbour who was rumoured to have been awarded one million HUF from a foundation.

While young Romany men were, to an extent, expected to cheat on girlfriends, young ladies who had been cheated were expected to react with an angry sense of injustice. One young man explained that if a girlfriend of his found out that he was cheating, her legitimate reaction was to call him a “pig” (*disznó*) and refuse to associate with him further. In fact, to continue to associate with the young man would open the young lady up to the accusation of being a “prostitute” (*kurva*). Young men with a track record of dating several young ladies at the same time were known as ‘*zsivány*’. András was well-known for being ‘*zsivány*’ in his treatment of women. He was constantly dating more than one girl without the knowledge of the girls involved and so was referred to as being *zsivány* with women. “Be careful. He is *zsivány*”, was a warning reiterated by several concerned young ladies in reference to several young men, “One girl isn’t enough for him” (“*Vigyázz magadra. Zsivány. Egy nő nem elég neki.*”). His *zsivány* behaviour meant that he was someone not to be trusted.

Among the settlement, it was said that the local minority self-government, upon receiving a delivery of clothes from the Red Cross allowed their wives first choice before distributing the clothing to the wider *Cigány* community, for whom the Red Cross had intended the delivery. This abuse of power was deemed *zsivány* (crooked). It was also said in the settlement that the minority self-government had received money at Christmas to issue to the Roma. Instead they had acted like crooks and kept all the money for themselves. This reputation of the *zsivány* minority self-government defined its status within the community. Every time a *Cigány* ball was scheduled there would be rumours that it was not going ahead as there was not enough funds – interpreted in the settlement as the organizing minority self-government being *zsivány*, while the government itself explained their financial difficulties by saying that they had inherited a debt from the former minority self-government. When the minority self-government made an unprecedented gift of a few rows of potatoes to every male Rom if they went to



harvest them for themselves, László complained at the quality of the potatoes used and refused to go and collect his share – once again the minority self-government were accused of being *zsivány*. There was little interaction between the settlement inhabitants and the minority self-government, but that that there was confirmed its *zsivány* reputation and simply reinforced their decision to not associate with the political body.

The Mayor was similarly dismissed as being *zsivány* (crooked). Everyone I spoke to (except for Katalin, who had been employed at the Mayor's office) dismissed him as a crook. Elek's colourful story about his dealings with the Mayor include the Mayor informing on him about alleged misconduct to the Dignity Foundation with whom Elek had a contract, and the Mayor consistently blocking his attempts to make public his plans to open thermal baths to attract a tourist trade to the village. In Christmas 2002, the Mayor paternally split the Christmas benefits over the festive season, rationalizing that the Roma would therefore be unable to spend it all at once and have money left over after Christmas day. With no personal interaction with the Mayor, such decisions were seen to lie with a *zsivány* character who was not interested in the welfare of the settlement inhabitants.

László once had a personal, first-hand experience with the local council that confirmed for him the *zsivány* nature of the political administration. László had put forward an application for additional support from the council in view of his disability and subsequent decreased income. Together with his niece, we went to the council meeting expecting to hear a discussion of László's request and, hopefully, a ruling in his favour. However, there was no mention of László's application and there was no prospect of it being brought up, especially as the minority self-government President, while being expected to attend local council meetings and listen to the discussion, has no mandate to vote.<sup>108</sup> So, the President of the Epervár minority self-government sat silently through the entire meeting. Incredulously witnessing the powerlessness of the minority self-government, compounded by the fact that it was the only hope László had of having his views represented, my two *Cigány* companions left the meeting in disgust – dismissing the Mayor and council as "*zsivány*".

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<sup>108</sup> Minority self-governments only have limited veto power (see Schafft and Brown, 2000).



This idea of crookedness is an accepted characteristic of people, and is applied especially to those in positions of economic and social influence. When referring to perceived monetary crookedness, the accusation of *zsivány* was accompanied by the familiar hand gesture of scooping aside money and pocketing it. To be *zsivány* is a characteristic that is looked down upon, but which is identified as being the reason for much of people's behaviour. This belief in this malign trait and the acceptance of it contributes to a fragmented community in which people distrust one another's motives. The concept of *zsivány* is intrinsically linked with the concept of *testvér*. While Melinda and her mother-in-law accused each other of being *zsivány* behind each others' backs, they continued to be friends. When a more distantly related *testvér* or non-*testvér* committed a *zsivány* act, the ramifications were more serious as this could be the basis of feuds, when allegiance to a particular *testvér* network had to be made. Often Melinda would advise me not to develop friendships with certain people, citing their *zsivány* nature as the reason. Often, these were the same people who were 'dirty' and who at times I was warned to close ranks against on grounds of *testvér* allegiance.

To fully appreciate the concept of *zsivány* and the notion of people having an intrinsically untrustworthy streak in them, one must consider the very particular notion of trust that exists in the Epervár Romany community. Trust is an ambiguous concept. A small example highlights this: Standing in the local settlement shop was the usual crowd of customers, waiting patiently as the slow business transactions took place. An elderly *Magyar* man asked the primarily *Cigány* crowd if the post office in the centre of the village was busy. "No, I was just there and it wasn't" answered someone. "That's strange," said the shopkeeper once the old man had gone on his way, "as today is state benefit day". "Yeah, the post office is full; I just didn't want him to know that". Non-malicious and unnecessary lying, of which this is an example, is a daily part of life in the settlement.

There are many layers of 'truth' in settlement discourse. As above, there is often a teasing nature to these untruths. "Your house has been demolished" shouted a friend as I cycled home, "Where are you going to sleep?" Teasing – friendly lies – are part of the every day good humoured banter that the Romany male population



in particular excels in. Additionally, there is a culture of lying to deceive with intent – lying to further one’s own self-interest and the interest of one’s *testvér* network. A conflicting story illustrates the nature of this lying. László once told me that the reason Pál, one of the elite entrepreneurs, got rich was that people coming to the village offering work to the man whose job it had been to distribute and organize agricultural work under communism, László’s father, had been told by Pál, falsely, that that man was dead. László’s father was in fact alive and, according to László, had done a good job. Admittedly, he had failed his family (*család*) by spending his wages on parties and alcohol, instead of giving it to his wife to buy food and clothes for the family, but had been a competent worker. By telling the men that László’s father was dead, Pál secured the business that the men had been offering for himself. According to László, deceit had robbed László’s dad of this work opportunity and was Pál’s opening to business success. However Katalin had her own version of events: Pál had started his business enterprise of providing casual labour after seeing her and her husband’s success. He simply contacted potential employers and offered cheaper labour than Katalin. Katalin said that László’s father drank too much while working so was sacked in favour of Katalin’s husband, who took over the role of distributing and organizing labour. These versions have two features in common: Pál became a successful entrepreneur and László’s father lost his job. Nearly every event had the similar multi-stranded versions. László’s dog had died, László claimed, while in fact it was roaming with a pack of dogs at the other small Epervár Romany settlement banished there after having bitten a child. Depending on whom you believed, Zsolt was imprisoned for either failing to pay a driving offence fine or for the theft of goods such as televisions. The father of Sára’s unborn child was unknown because of the number of partners she had at the same time, or the father was the cad Balázs who denied paternity but was regarded by some as obviously the father as he was Sára’s only boyfriend. Such stories and counter-stories had a purpose – they were rooted in *testvér* allegiance.

Above I have presented material to illustrate the lack of trust within the community.<sup>109</sup> With people suspecting one another of *zsivány* (crooked) behaviour, at times, despite the appearance of good relations and friendship, there

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<sup>109</sup> Lack of trust was identified as a key hindrance in the effectiveness of minority self-governments in localities across Hungary (Koulis, 2001:66-70).



is a lack of trust between people. Good argues that “without trust, the everyday social life we take for granted is simply not possible” (1988:32). He expands on this theme by recognizing that the social world functions because of the element of predictability in people’s lives. Experience, actions and reaction follow rules allowing people, over time, to predict each other’s behaviour. It is this ability to correctly predict how the person that one is in cooperation with will act in the future that trust, at its most simple, is based on (Gambetta, 1988:217). The evidence presented here suggests flaws in Good’s and Gambetta’s models as Epervár Roma predict that others will be crooked, but still do not (because of this) trust them. Instead they distrust non-*testvér* and are constantly suspicious of close *testvér* too. No-one ever imagines that his/her own behaviour is crooked. For instance, employing close *testvér* to fill work vacancies is viewed by those involved as perfectly natural and legitimate, while other non-close *testvér* who were not offered work would interpret such behaviour as *zsivány* – despite the fact that they would do the same if it was their close relative distributing work.

This has implications for outside agencies working with the Epervár Roma. To outsiders, such as myself and the Dignity Foundation, it feels as if a game is being played, the rules and purpose of which are ambiguous (see Conclusion). Over the course of my stay in the village, I never once felt that I had ‘mastered the rules of the game’, but rather felt that I was playing a game the rules of which I never fully understood. At times I felt I that I had reached a plateau of understanding, but then another situation would unfold that would question my ability to predict people’s behaviour. After twelve-months embedded in the settlement, I was still unable to trust the motivations behind people’s actions.

### **5 Moral Relations Beyond *Testvér*: lending and dealing**

There are, however, situations in which non-*testvér* cooperate. Inherent distrust is overcome by strategies based on the moral dimension of the exchange of goods.<sup>110</sup> The lending of money and dealing of goods is one strategy for building relations between people who ordinarily do not interact. For example, András owned a stylish tracksuit that had, several years previously, belonged to László. While my

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<sup>110</sup> One might say that the community is built on distrust and attempts to circumvent that (see Campbell, 1964).

friendship with both networks of close *testvér* highlighted the frictions between the two groups, when in both households the tracksuit was discussed, both parties mentioned the transaction with respect and an awareness as to with whom the deal had been agreed. The social dimension of the movement of goods (Mauss, 1970; Malinowski, 1926) and the idea that the moral nature of reciprocity can be calculated by the tolerance of the imbalance in individual exchanges (Bloch, 1973) provides the basis of this analysis of the Epervár *Cigány* culture of lending money and dealing goods. For the purposes of this thesis, I explore how these strategies play an invaluable role in creating relationships between non-*testvér*, as many of these long-term transactions take place between non-*testvér*. First, I shall overview the nature of these transactions, and then draw on specific examples to illustrate how these transactions create moral relationships beyond those of everyday close *testvér* relations. Unlike Stafford (2000), who utilizes a broad definition of relatedness to include relations of reciprocity between neighbours and friends, in this analysis I limit relatedness to the local word *testvér* as utilized by my informants, and so examine reciprocity as a strategy of creating moral bonds between non-*testvér*.

These transactions take place in an environment that values constant ‘movement’: men and women should always be occupied in productive activities (as will become clearer in Chapter Five). As an Epervár Rom, to be accused of being ‘lazy’ (*lusta*) is an insult. Lending and dealing are important daily manifestations of this enterprise-driven community. Daily life is defined by the constant interaction of people, and these people are often discussing some form of deal. While women, on the occasions that they get a chance to break from their housework to chat, usually speak about the price of goods, cooking and gossip about family, men are frequently either discussing or partaking in some sort of business exchange. Women, on the other hand, are the experts in getting loans from friends, close family (*család*), *testvér*, neighbours and even local shopkeepers. It is they who effectively utilize the pawnshops, making sure that goods are always safely redeemed. In the settlement, there is an advanced culture of lending, borrowing and dealing and it is this that I now turn to.

To appreciate the climate in which lending and dealing interactions take place, superficially to do with securing property, it is important to recognize the lack of



value placed on many material possessions within the settlement.<sup>111</sup> This idea of the temporal nature of objects is explored by Kaprow (1991) in an article that explores the lack of structure in a Spanish Romany community. I likewise encountered similar treatment of material objects and conclude that many objects are mainly valued in terms of their worth in future transactions, and their role as creating relationships between non-*testvér*.<sup>112</sup> For example, the gift of a bottle of whiskey that my parents made to Katalin was immediately assessed as valuable, not in cash terms, but in terms of its use to Katalin as a gift to an important, non-*testvér* contact. The whiskey was later presented as a gift from Katalin to the *Magyar* landowner for whom Katalin organized work teams. Just as the whiskey had been a tactical gift from my parents to Katalin, Katalin made it a tactical gift from her to the landowner.<sup>113</sup> Similarly, Melinda's sons from her first marriage brought a fancy child's bike, among other objects, with them from Holland where they had been visiting their father. The bike was given to Melinda in the knowledge that she would be able to sell it in the village (which she did, with much dramatized negotiation, to her brother-in-law).

Through looking at how Romany settlement dwellers lend cash and deal material objects, both arguably temporal in nature, we should gain insight into the social role of these transactions. Borrowing money from and making deals with non-*testvér* are forms of building relations of cooperation beyond the familiar boundaries of *testvér*. Before elucidating on individual transactions between non-*testvér*, I shall use the story of the close family (*család*) who moved to Canada to explore this point that transactions are primarily about social relations.

Upon moving into the house that I rented from the family who moved to Canada, I bought certain items of furniture from them: a bed, wardrobes, a carpet and television. Following the family's departure, items left in the house, which they had not sold before leaving (most of their furniture had already been sold to raise money for the aeroplane tickets), were slowly sold off. The first sale had in fact

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<sup>111</sup> Gold is an exception, as it is highly valued because of its constant worth: it can always be readily translated into cash in pawnshop transactions.

<sup>112</sup> 'Emotional attachment' to 'worthless' objects was evident, if rare, in the community. Zsolt professed a particular attachment to a Van Gogh print hanging in his kitchen, his wife to a glass-topped coffee table and László to his deceased grandfather's bike.

<sup>113</sup> The gift giving was a tactical gesture between Katalin, the *Cigány* entrepreneur, and her work provider — an idea examined in the next chapter. There was no significance in the fact that the gift had originated from my parents (see Parry, 1986).



been arranged before the family departed. On the first day after the family's departure to Canada, the crates of empty bottles that remained from the farewell party the night before and a glass-topped coffee table from the main bedroom of the house were taken away by a man and woman who claimed right to them. It transpired that the male head of the family, Zsolt, before leaving for Canada, had sold the table to this couple for 5,000 HUF (and had arranged that they be allowed the empty bottles which are returnable for cash at shops in Hungary). Zsolt had not wanted his wife to know of the deal, as his wife was very house-proud and possessive of certain items, and this table had been one of these more treasured objects. This couple had driven from a neighbouring village and were not considered *testvér*.

Over the course of the following year, while I was living in the house, items continued to be sold off. Despite the fact that the family was living and working in Toronto, they continued to play an involved role in family life through their continued participation in deals and exchanges. The deep-fryer was sold in March, the fridge deal, following protracted negotiations over the phone between the fridge recipients and the family in Canada, was clinched in May. These deals were made with close *testvér* (to Zsolt's niece and sister) and as such were a means for the emigrated family (*család*) to continue play an active role in their own *testvér* network. This example provides a sound basis for appreciating the social importance of such transactions.

### **5.1 Dealing**

Below, I detail various deals to illustrate the scope and range of these small business transactions.<sup>114</sup> Áron and Barbara's house rarely looked the same twice. The basic furniture that comprised their living quarters changed at regular intervals. Wardrobes were swapped for fancier ones, televisions exchanged for working ones, and wardrobes swapped again – this time for less impressive ones. The deals and swaps would sometimes bring cash, exchanging a fairly smart wardrobe set for an uglier, less substantial one would involve the recipient of the uglier one receiving a sum of money to even out the deal. Áron's ill health and lack of motivation meant that he did not work and rarely involved himself in productive business enterprises. Rather, Áron and Barbara lived primarily from

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<sup>114</sup> A swap or exchange of objects at which money exchanges hands too.



state benefits. When money was particularly low, cash could be obtained through an exchange of furniture that would result in the couple owning worse quality items, but with money as compensation. As the family (*család*) was poor, their house was barely furnished, so the television and wardrobe were the only pieces of furniture that they had to exchange. These deals took place with both *testvér* (e.g. brother-in-law) and non-*testvér*.

Before a return visit to Britain, I was asked by László to bring back with me a roll of black, sticky-back plastic covering (he was convinced that such things must be cheaper in Britain) to cover the freezer top and his huge speakers of which he was very proud. As requested, I brought back a roll. With his nephew József's help and a great deal of physical effort, László unscrewed the speakers, removed the old covering and applied the new plastic. The next day the huge speakers had gone, replaced with much smaller, less powerful, less impressive ones. The plastic covering had improved the aesthetics of the speakers, thus enabling a deal that meant, while László lost his big speakers, he gained smaller ones and a cash supplement, in this instance 5,000 HUF. Over my fieldwork period, László swapped and dealt with four different pairs of speakers. The speakers gradually diminished in size, but László never appeared to be disgruntled, always insisting on showing just how powerful the new ones were by turning up the volume to its highest capability and blasting the music out. László and his son enjoyed these moments of anarchy as *Cigány* music cascaded through the air, but before long Melinda would always complain that it was hurting her head and insist on the volume being lowered. The point I want to emphasize is the temporal status of these objects. Their worth is valued in terms of what they can be exchanged, sold or pawned for. László made his speakers more attractive, and therefore more valuable, the day before dealing them to a *Cigány* man who I had never seen in our area of the settlement before. In fact, on each of these occasions, the speakers were not sold to *testvér*, but to other settlement inhabitants. It was not for his aesthetic appreciation that I had been asked to bring the black covering, as I had presumed, but rather to try and guarantee a good deal for László.

The ability of Epervár Roma to obtain any manner of goods in a short period of time suggests that there is an extensive network between non-*testvér*. For example, during my fieldwork, mobile phones were good business in the



settlement.<sup>115</sup> There was a fairly fast-paced circulation of mobile phones with no one owning one phone for long. One evening, on the street corner, I was teased by a group of young men for my brick-like mobile that had been given to me by a friend. It was probably one of the first of Nokia's models. László believed that the reason I so rarely used it was that I was too embarrassed to be seen with it in public, a partly correct diagnosis that paints an adequate picture of my "brick". A couple of evenings later, one of the young men from this crowd ran up carrying a phone identical to mine! He had swapped his much better phone for the old Nokia model, receiving cash in the deal, for the old model. He managed to do this by accessing a non-*testvér* network with links to the neighbouring town. The speed of this transaction and the inhabitant's ability to secure whatever goods they wish, even such an out-dated model phone, is striking.

At times, these networks encompass non-*Cigány* too. Just as Katalin strategically presented the gift of the bottle of whiskey to her *Magyar* landowner contact, so members of the Romany community occasionally dealt with non-Roma. For example, József once had a mobile phone that he wanted to sell for 16,000 HUF (the shop price for such a model was 20,000 HUF, according to him) and made a deal with a *Magyar* lady who lived at the other end of his road. József swapped the mobile phone for the *Magyar* woman's satellite dish. He and his brother staggered home with the dish balanced on their bikes. Days later the dish was gone, replaced with a CD and cassette player Hi-Fi system with huge speakers. Fitted on top of the large wardrobe that comprised the family's only furniture in their living space other than a double bed, this powerful music system had been swapped for the satellite with József paying over 20,000 HUF too. He said that he

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<sup>115</sup> In the settlement, all men had a mobile (I knew of no woman who owned one or expressed a desire for one), but there was a shortage of battery re-chargers and SIM cards. László had a charging lead so for a while allowed people with the same model phone to charge their phone at his house. The running joke throughout the settlement that year was one person calling another on their mobile, letting the phone ring, and the caller hanging up upon the receiver answering. This was a free joke as no one had to pay, and frequent calls of this sort made the receiver of the hoax calls infuriated. After a couple such calls, László would hop out from his chair in the living area (where he invariably spent the day) shouting out down the street "Was that you, Nórbí?" to which there would be loud laughs from his brother's place where the men would be congregated. With no land line phones in the settlement, as phone line rental was deemed too expensive, mobile phones were an important means of communication. László used his to phone doctors, car dealers, and later lawyers on his behalf of his brother, as well as to receive calls from his brother in Canada on it. As László was being wheeled into the surgery for his second amputation, he received two calls, one from his brother in Canada and one from the other Epervár man who had had a similar leg amputation. So, a toy at times, mobile phones also served as important communication facilitators.



had made this latter transaction because he “could not understand the television channels”.

## **5.2 Lending**

The transaction of lending money (interest free) is common practice throughout the settlement. Money is lent between a wide range of people, examples of which I shall explore below. As we shall see, it is not the case that money is exclusively lent between *testvér*, but rather, as with dealing, these financial transactions help build moral relations that stretch beyond *testvér*. Often, in fact, *testvér*, and more precisely female *testvér*, prefer to lend ‘in kind’. None of these loans rely on written documentation or third-party witnesses, but mutually understood obligations.

As noted above, one of the characteristics of loans between close female *testvér* (sisters and sisters-in-law, daughters and daughters-in-law, mothers and mother-in-laws) is that often the loans are ‘lending in kind’, rather than cash. Katalin’s experiences with her close *testvér* best illustrate this idea of lending in kind. Katalin’s children and their partners worked for Katalin during the summer and it was she who was responsible for distributing wages to the whole work team, including her children. On one occasion in late summer, Donata (Katalin’s daughter-in-law) asked Katalin for more money, on top of her wages for that week, saying that it was needed to buy food. Katalin, with her domineering personality, never made such requests yet during the summer and autumn she was able to give money to her family in this way as these were the seasons in which she had a significant income. So, on top of the wages that her close *testvér* received for working for her, if Katalin wanted, she could provide extra support.<sup>116</sup> During the winter, however, there was no seasonal agricultural work for Katalin to organize, so she became dependent on the wages of her sons who went out caning. Her close *testvér*, in return for her financial help at other times, paid Katalin’s winter bills (gas, electricity, water).

In the same way, Rózsi and Melinda, sisters-in-law as they were married to brothers (László and István), living close to one another and visiting each other

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<sup>116</sup> This, in the settlement, was called “help” (*segíteni*). This ‘help’ took many forms and was always remembered, as ‘help’ was expected to be repaid.

daily, occasionally gave each other food: a plate of doughnuts from Rózsi one time, the leg of a pig another, but the lending of cash was rare. However, when István's hamstering team was earning the most from this activity, female *testvér* did approach Rózsi, István's wife, asking for a loan, knowing that she was in a position to lend. At this time, László also borrowed 20,000 HUF from his brother to help buy a car, despite the strained nature of their relationship. As a friend said, she asks for loans from "those who will give". This means friends, *testvér* and acquaintances with the means and disposition to lend.

In this section, I focus on lending between non-*testvér* in order to demonstrate the nature of these reciprocal relationships. The outcome of Melinda's struggle to buy shoes from a non-*testvér* Epervár *Cigány* man provides a sound basis to understand the nature of these exchanges and unspoken agreements. The man with a pair of ladies' shoes to sell approached Melinda on his rounds of the settlement houses, trying to sell the shoes for 1,000 HUF. Melinda thought the shoes were attractive and recognized that it was a good deal, as such a pair would cost far more if bought from a shop. Melinda had no money with which to buy the shoes however, so it was agreed that the man would leave the shoes with her overnight while she got together the cash. Melinda planned to ask Pál's wife for a loan. Pál's family (*család*) lived in comparatively wealthy circumstances. Other than friendly greetings on the street, these two women rarely interacted with one another. After declaring to László and Dávid that this is from whom Melinda would ask for a loan, she became embarrassed and nervous about approaching Pál's wife. Even though such agreements between the two had been reached before, Melinda felt uncomfortable about once again asking for money. Melinda's son, excited at the prospect of a trip to the unfamiliar house, encouraged his mother to go down and ask. But while Melinda stalled, the evening drew in and it became dark, so Melinda was able to use this as an excuse to delay the trip until the following morning. She left it too late, however, as the man returned early in the morning to retrieve his merchandise. Melinda did not have the cash waiting for him, so he took the shoes back. Melinda later complained of his crooked (*zsivány*) behaviour, saying that he could no longer expect to come to her house for medicine. László, because of his illness, had lots of prescription drugs in the house and this man, when in need of certain medicine, would visit Melinda and László to get what he



needed.<sup>117</sup> Melinda was angry because she believed she had a long-term reciprocal relationship with this man who was not *testvér*, built on him having repeatedly used László's medication. When the man had been in a position to reciprocate, by allowing Melinda to keep the shoes while she secured some cash, he instead showed a lack of trust, a lack of respect and an unwillingness to allow a relationship to be sustained through the debt by taking the shoes from Melinda.

In contrast, Melinda tactically encouraged relations between herself and non-*testvér Cigány* women by allowing them to owe her money. Melinda had been given several silver rings, necklaces and earrings by her sons from her first marriage to sell in the settlement. In order to sell them, she visited households that she did not usually visit asking if anyone was interested in buying the jewellery. Many women expressed an interest in buying the goods, but very few were able to pay for them, as they did not have any cash. Melinda agreed that the women could have their pieces of jewellery and pay her for them upon receipt of their state benefit ("*családi pénz*").

Local shops, close to the settlement, occasionally lent to their customers. Loans from shops meant that goods could be 'bought' without money, and again, no interest is charged. The shopkeeper would make a note of how much the items 'bought' cost, and when the borrower had enough money to pay for the goods, the account would be settled. This was a rare arrangement that female household heads turned to when they had no other options. As we shall see below, the personality of the *Magyar* shopkeeper and the *Cigány* borrower, and their relationship, are important factors in these situations. In this way, these transactions are also rooted in social relations.

A friend of mine, holding her baby, explained how, whereas she was able to contain her hunger until she had the money to buy food, she could not expect the same from her baby son. He was crying because he was hungry and so needed to be fed. Her usual lending partner was her friend who lived opposite, also the mother of two young children. Neither women's husbands had regular

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<sup>117</sup> There was a general feeling of ambivalence in the settlement towards the local doctor and medical authorities. People had medicines in their homes and would encourage you to take them, rather than follow the doctor's advice. The Epervár doctor said that the trait among the local *Cigány* population was for them to only visit the doctor when the illness became serious.



employment so both relied on state benefit as their main source of income. This meant that, on this occasion, the mother of the hungry baby could not expect anything from her friend across the road as her financial situation was as desperate as her own. With no other option, she was going to ask the local settlement shop for a loan. They always gave to her, she said, because they knew that she would pay it back as soon as she could. As I had just returned from the shop, my friend asked me if there had been many people in there. Hearing that there were only a couple of people waiting to be served, she made a list of essential items that included food and nappies for her baby son. As with Melinda approaching Pál's wife, this lady displayed a degree of embarrassment at being forced into the position of having to ask for money from non-*testvér*. It was a last resort to turn to the shopkeeper, but obviously she had done it before as they had built up an understanding based on her prompt repayment of the loans.

Contrasting the situation in Epervár with a near-by town is illuminating. Epervár is renowned as a centre of employment and opportunity. Many *Cigány* populations in Hungary are bereft of the basic living conditions that Epervár Roma enjoy. The brother of the female head of a household in Epervár spent periods of time in Epervár working. Ordinarily, he lived with his wife and two children in a very depressed small town. In his home town, the local *Magyar* population was wealthy, while the Romany population was very poor with no employment opportunities. Therefore, in the summer and autumn agricultural seasons, he travelled to Epervár to work for three weeks, followed by a week at home with his close family (*család*). This way he managed to provide an income for his family. He described the town that he lived in as being very unlike Epervár. Whereas he identified there being life and joy and interaction in Epervár, there was no such community spirit in his home town. He said that, as there was no *Cigány* settlement in his home town, there was no sense of community. People did not belong to any *Cigány* quarter, but were rather dispersed throughout a hostile *Magyar* population.<sup>118</sup> Additionally, there was no lending or sharing between households because, he explained, people had nothing spare to give. I see these two attributes as interlinked. Lending and sharing is primarily about building relations between non-household units. In the above case, it is secondary

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<sup>118</sup> Walking through the town, local *Magyar* residents shouted at him, "Go to Strasbourg!" referring to the well-publicized case of a group of Hungarian Roma who sought, and were granted, political asylum in France.



that people have nothing to give, more important is the fact that people have no relations beyond their close family (*család*). Lending and dealing in Epervár create and maintain moral bonds between non-*testvér*. My friend who asks the local settlement shopkeeper for a loan is successful because the loan is part of a relationship between two people, consolidated by trust and understanding. Lending and dealing are never merely economic transactions, but rather build on and feed into a community network. Such transactions have more to do with social relations than with personal wealth.

## **6 Conclusion**

Social interactions in Epervár are fundamentally informed by *testvér* allegiance. Working relations, personal relations and crisis situations are all, to an extent, dictated by *testvér* values. This allegiance is flexible and fluid, with networks of support modifying according to the situation. One important dimension of this social interaction is the accompanying concept of crooked (*zsivány*) behaviour. This concept is used to explain people's behaviour and contributes to the atmosphere of distrust between non-*testvér*. There are, however, mechanisms within the settlement to prevent the disintegration of the community into hostile *testvér* factions. Above, I detailed the strategy of lending and dealing, suggesting that it is one strategy for building moral relations between non-*testvér*. The Epervár Romany community is full of contradictions and ambiguities, but it is these very values that create the settlement lifestyle.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Economic Strategies**

#### **1 The Nature of Work in Epervár**

The cultural values and social structures of the Epervár Romany community influence the economic survival strategies of the local 'invisible economy'. These unofficial enterprises, or "alternative income strategies" (Bourgois, 1995), have been labelled the "informal economy" (Hart, 1973) and, as also observed by Hann (1992:19), Gábor (1985), Sik (1992) and Corrin (1993:44), have a solid foundation in Hungary as the 'second economy'. This co-existence of the formal and informal economy was noted in Chapter One. For instance, under state socialism, Epervár Romany men took time off from their daily labour to pursue seasonal hamstering work (a business strategy I detail below). This chapter shall go on to provide evidence to support the proposition put forward in the second chapter that Romany people create and maintain relationships with *Magyars*. I shall show that most of the economic strategies that the Roma engage in rely on non-Romany 'middlemen'. Finally, I shall identify the characteristics of the entrepreneurs that are essential to the success of these business enterprises. The Roma have developed strategies and skills to negotiate their position in the post-socialist free market economy. As shall become clear, the strategies employed by local entrepreneurs are removed from the Dignity Foundation's ideals of contractual relations and community cooperation. Rather, local enterprise flourishes by effectively manipulating the values and system of the settlement. I suggest that understanding the local context of entrepreneurship and the values that inform these enterprise initiatives is essential if community development-focused NGOs are going to successfully engage with the community.

As touched upon in the previous section on lending and dealing, contrary to popular Hungarian stereotypes which classify *Cigánys* as innately lazy, the Epervár Roma are constantly on the move, metaphorically and physically. Earning money is a source of pride, a daily activity that provides essential food and shelter for families, and keeps members of the community in constant contact and continually exploring new business avenues. Observing the Epervár economic strategies, I gained a similar impression to Hart's: "It seemed as if the economy



was being made, unmade and remade from day to day” (1988:117).<sup>119</sup> This chapter will detail and discuss the main income generating activities of the Epervár Romany community. Pointedly, there are a few local Romany entrepreneurs who are key figures in providing employment to a large number of settlement inhabitants, and there are many more, smaller scale, entrepreneurs responsible for the smaller income generating activities.

According to the President of the local minority self-government, of the 90% unemployed Epervár Roma, 20% draw income support and 70% live off casual labour. Casual labour is a broad category and throughout one year a working man may turn his hand to a number of jobs, those he has been recruited for and ones which he has instigated himself as a means of making money. A look at Zoltán’s work schedule over a one-year period serves as an example of work opportunities open to industrious Epervár Romany men. Zoltán spent the winter working the cane, the spring hamstering and the summer taking a variety of manual labour jobs from laying television cable lines, to hoeing, to mud brick making. The autumn was the return of the hamster season but better and steadier employment was offered by his mother at a factory, so instead he worked there with the rest of his usual hamstering team, his male close *testvér*. Throughout the year he had short-term, temporary, evening work playing his synthesizer at different venues. In this way, Zoltán, managed to work full days the whole year. “He works for money to buy food. We are animals that need to eat”, laughed his wife good naturedly as she, cooking a huge pot of soup and pile of pancakes, considered how many long, difficult hours Zoltán worked. Always in a very cheery mood, always with a sparkle in his eye, the energy that Zoltán possessed was impressive. As he said, pointing to his bulging arm muscles, it is not the muscle that matters, but the ability to persevere. Such a work schedule, most often involving taxing physical tasks, required great stamina – and the ability to secure such jobs in the first instance.

In this thesis, I use the term ‘entrepreneur’ to mean “self-employed accumulators of material surplus” (Hart, 1975:6). Those Roma who organize the local invisible economy activities are entrepreneurs and the nature of employment in Epervár means that the majority of male inhabitants engage in entrepreneurial activities of

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<sup>119</sup> Hart writes about the slums of Ghana’s capital, Accra.

one sort or another during the year. One of the major distinctions between the types of activities organized is based in terms of how many people are engaged in the activity organized by the entrepreneurs. As we shall see, the bike assembly business, organized by Tamás, is a one-man job, hamstering normally attracts teams of five men and, on a much larger scale, Katalin regularly employs thirty people during summer and autumn.

Most of my experiences and insights into the workings of the large-scale entrepreneurial activities are gathered from Katalin, with whom I developed a very close relationship. Widowed and head of her hard-working close *testvér* network, she provides and oversees work for herself, her children and children-in-law, and other Epervár Roma. Katalin falls into the category recognized in a recent report to be one of the “many *Cigány* businessmen [who] are currently making a living out of supplying or subcontracting *Cigány* labour for casual jobs, paying pittances to those who actually carry out the work and providing them [with] no social security coverage or job protection... currently satisfies genuine needs on both sides and is unquestionably a useful service” (Kállai and Törzsök, 2000). To illustrate, Katalin arranged employment for a group of thirty local Roma at a factory. She had secured the work placement by approaching the factory owner herself, and guaranteeing a competent work force to him. She formed the workforce from Epervár people, mainly Roma, by calculating who would be suitable for the work and enlisting them by approaching them individually. Through her I was able to understand how such large-scale work-distributing entrepreneurs organize and maintain their business enterprises.

My other main informant was László who, even with his amputated leg, managed to take part in business dealings, and constantly encouraged me to accompany him and take notes on the *Cigány* way of life. His determination and energy were characteristic of smaller scale entrepreneurs in the community. While Katalin was proud to be a little distant from the inhabitants of the settlement, László was an ingrained member of the community and kept up these connections despite his disability. Part of this was his rather inspirational, continued participation in a range of business deals. László continued to organize a very profitable hamstering team. As well as the hamstering, he remained involved in the dealings that sustained the community beyond the parameters of *testvér*. These methods of



obtaining goods were discussed previously in regard to their function of creating bonds beyond the confines of *testvér*, but are in fact equally important as economic strategies.

Unfortunately throughout my fieldwork period three major businessmen who distribute work to Roma in the village refused to speak to me. In the first instance, I was told by a third party that this was because they were scared as they were in the process of being prosecuted for failing to pay taxes. I thought that over the year of living in the village slowly trust would be established as I showed my impartiality and lack of interest in illegal matters and in obtrusive research. However, we never established a relationship beyond simple greetings, and in my last week when I tried to approach these people again I was once more rebuffed: kindly, but clearly. These men grouped together in the winter to rent the cane land from the Mayor, organized hoeing and harvesting work in the summer and autumn (like Katalin), and went out working with close *testvér* during the hamstering seasons. I will therefore provide an over-view of the major business activities in the settlement concentrating mainly on Katalin and László as my two primary informants. I begin with a descriptive summary of the main business activities over the course of one year, before drawing out and identifying the common traits that these activities share.

## **2 A Year of Work in Epervár**

### **2.1 Spring**

#### **2.1.1 Hamstering (*Hörcsögölés*)**

Spring work is dominated by hamstering, a business activity that provides good money in a short space of time for the Roma of Epervár. The hamsters (*hörcsög*)<sup>120</sup> live wild and, if on farmland, eat vast amounts of crop, so it is in the farmer's best interest that the animals are killed. The hamster fur is used to make luxury items such as wall hangings and the lining of coats that are sold abroad (e.g. Germany). The Roma form the first stage of this process by catching and skinning the hamsters and selling on the fur (buying price was 400 HUF per fur at the beginning of the season), discarding the innards of the hamsters in plastic bags

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<sup>120</sup> These are European Hamsters (*Cricetus cricetus*) that are much larger than British domestic hamsters.

thrown into the countryside, or roadside. The fur is sent to a wholesaler in Almáshely, from there to one in Budapest and then to tailors in Szeged. The finished products (fur coats and wall hangings) are then sold abroad. In spring the hamsters breed, nursing the young underground during the summer months and emerging with juveniles in the autumn, retreating back underground for winter hibernation. In spring and autumn, when the hamsters are regularly moving to and from their burrows through holes in the earth, the opportunity is taken to catch them by laying traps in holes leading to and from the burrows. Usually car-load teams of men (i.e. five) cooperate together to do this work.

The origins of this important economic and social activity in Epervár are somewhat shrouded in mystery. László told me a rather mythical story of how a man, travelling down from the north-east of Hungary, described how where he had come from hamsters are trapped and skinned and their fur sold. The trap mechanism (*tór*) and the technique were explained, giving the Epervár Roma the knowledge they needed to begin this venture for themselves. So the story goes and today in Epervár nearly every fit man turns his hands to hamstering.

The work is, by nature, relentless and the environment often fairly inhospitable (this description could well be applied to any number of jobs the Epervár Roma tackle). The early morning starts, necessary to beat birds of prey and carnivorous animals from getting to, and devouring, the dead hamsters, mean that the men walk through dew soaked crops in muddy, cold, often wet conditions. The morning session involves returning to the land where the previous day traps were laid. These traps are marked by small metal poles, stabbed in the ground, and made visible by a small shred of plastic tied to the end. The men cover a segment of ground each. Combing the land, the (generally) five men walk steadily in parallel, thirty feet or so apart, to the end of the field. The trap mechanism is triggered by a hamster trying to leave its burrow through the hole, causing a sharp metal prong to swiftly stab the hamster through the head. Any undisturbed traps are left. Triggered traps are pulled from the ground, the trap and hamster slung over the shoulder on a simple metal loop, and the hole covered over. Once all the traps have been inspected the men return home where they each have assigned jobs in the skinning process. Sitting in a circle the first job is to crack open and reveal the skull, the second to peel down the skin, and the third task is to stretch



the skin over simple wire drying racks. Once dried, about a week later, the furs are sold according to number, quality and size. The afternoon task involves walking for miles again, this time scanning the ground for holes. Each hole is then inspected for signs of potential (the better hamster workers are better able to correctly identify a hole that is in use) by looking at soil disturbance and how gnawed the surrounding vegetation is. If a hole looks like it will yield a hamster, a trap is set, inserted and marked with a flag.

Hamster traps are precious as they are necessary for hamstering – men without traps cannot go out working or must work with those that do. A car is another important asset, although several men work nearby fields, travelling daily on bikes. These men, however, were collecting in the region of twelve hamsters a day, while rival car owning teams were regularly bringing in at least three times that number. Workers who rely on bikes as their mode of transportation are at a disadvantage for many reasons. Bikes mean that they cannot travel very far to reach land, nor can they easily cycle on the dirt tracks necessary to travel along to reach the fields. A car means that the team can easily cover a lot of ground, accessing outlying terrain via a series of very rough dirt tracks. This way these teams are able to pick and choose which land to work with, and lay traps strategically. Bikes restrict movement and access, and therefore hamster yields are lower. In addition to this a bike is an inadequate carrier of equipment. László's boot would be filled with one hundred and fifty or so traps and flags. Sometimes traps would be tied to the roof rack of the car. Cars have a greater capacity for carrying equipment. The three men that worked nearby land would leave their traps and flags outside all the time. Over night unused traps and flags would be left outdoors and during the day, in between the skinning (which would take place at home) and the trap laying process, equipment would necessarily be left outdoors – neither a secure nor satisfactory arrangement. And, considering all these factors, teams reliant on bikes were unattractive to new recruits who would rather work with successful car based teams, therefore car based teams would naturally be composed of the stronger workers. One of the men from a bike based team did manage to buy himself a car in the summer and, at the other end of the scale, bike theft was said to be rife during the hamstering season as men desperately secured some form of transport.

There are a couple of factors that contribute to a successful hamstering team. One is the skill and experience of workers. As mentioned above there are individuals who are better able at identifying holes that will yield a hamster. The quality of the soil and the crops planted also make a difference as the hamsters prefer certain soil types and specific crops, preferring wheat to sugar beet and black soil to lighter types. The number of traps a team owns also contributes as simply the more traps the more chance of catching more hamsters. The most successful team in Epervár worked under the leadership of László's brother, István, who owned the car, the traps and negotiated access to land. With the most traps, this team of young, fit, enthusiastic men with access to good land, were able to regularly collect 130 hamsters. In contrast I recorded László's catch record in successive days: 30, 69, 104, 40, 30, 60 – obviously a more erratic and less substantial record.

## **2.2 Summer**

In summer there is a wider choice of activities as Epervár is an agricultural village and so the summer months are full of jobs requiring unskilled agricultural labourers. The work, pay and conditions all vary, but generally work is physical, subject to extreme weather conditions and pay is low.

Workers are normally paid day wages (*napszám*). Some wages are pre-determined and daily while other work is paid 'by the sack', i.e. a day's wages from potato harvesting depends upon how many sacks were filled during the day. A day's wage varies from 1,500 to 2,000 HUF, but many people complain that the 2,000 HUF is simply too little. With 2,000 HUF "cigarettes, bread and a little food" can be bought, but nothing long-term, nor particularly nutritional.

### **2.2.1 Hoeing**

Katalin arranged that she would provide a work force to hoe the land of a sugar beet factory. There is 200 hectares of land to be hoed. Situated about an hour's drive away, at first just two car loads of workers went out to look over the site and work, before Katalin transported a bus load of Roma. "Wait until you see that, Fran, *Cigánys* as far as the eye can see". For a day's work, early morning until evening under the relentless summer sun, the day's wage was 2,000 HUF. Katalin directed us where to hoe, and later, when more workers were there, Katalin's sons



and son-in-law took a directive role and instructed people which rows to hoe, keeping up the pace and ensuring that everyone worked steadily. Each person is assigned two rows and given a hoe. A long wooden stick with a short metal blade, the work consists of slicing weeds as they grow between the sugar beet. With the plants small the work was straightforward, but the work became harder as the crops grew. Taller plants meant that spotting weeds was harder and work was made unpleasant from walking through dew soaked crops. During the summer sickness was common from these working conditions.

### **2.2.2 Brick-Making**

One of the one-off jobs of the summer was an order of bricks for the building of a house in the near-by town of Szilvaszék. These bricks are made outdoors from a mixture of mud, straw and water. Land out past the Epervár rubbish dump site was temporarily leased from the Mayor as suitable place for the men to make and dry the bricks. Water being a necessary component of the brick-making process, a man-made chasm had been cut out of the ground to provide water. Buckets were lowered on a rope, filled with water and hauled up to be added to the mixture being turned and mixed with shovels. The mixture was carried a few metres to the area where the bricks were being shaped. A wooden structure, approximately two feet by one foot with a three-quarter foot depth, was the basic tool of the trade. With neither top nor bottom the mud and straw mixture was shovelled into this receptacle. Using fists, the mixture was pressed down to the ground and the top flattened. The wooden box was then lifted up, leaving a wet brick that would dry over a couple of days. Next to this brick another would be made, so that by the end of the day there were rows of mud bricks. Once the bricks had dried they would be turned over, and then later taken to build the house. Four thousand bricks were needed for one house.

Brick making is a traditional Romany occupation. A census held in Hungarian territories in January 1893 found that brick-making was one of the most common occupations practiced by Roma, along with metal-work, wood-work, hawking for women and horse-dealing for men (Fraser, 1995: 211-212). In modern Hungary Roma are often employed in the construction industry, employed as builders in industrial areas. As politically aware Roma like to say, "We built Hungary". Their physical labour built the Hungarian infrastructure, and still Roma dominate the

low level of the construction industry. I queried Károly, who was a member of the brick-making team, how he had learnt the trade and why Roma dominated the scene. “Tradition” was his answer. He learnt from his father, who learnt from his parents. Everyone learns from their parents. “*Magyars* don’t do this work because they do not know how to do it, only *Cigánys* know what to do”, said Károly before expanding on the idea that for Roma work is in their blood.

## **2.3 Autumn**

### **2.3.1 Factory Work**

Katalin was offering work at a factory that handled frozen fruit and vegetables. Until January, there was work for about thirty people at a factory situated at the other side of Debrecen (about an hour’s bus drive away from the settlement). Work was in shifts that alternated weekly: one week was the day shift when work began at six in the morning until two in the afternoon, the other was the night shift when work began at two in the afternoon and stopped at ten at night. The daily shift was always eight hours long, with one twenty minute break in the middle. Each shift earned the worker 2,000 HUF and a male friend, who had hamstered during the spring but had explained how the weather and working conditions often made him ill, told me that in comparison the factory work was easy work. With workers coming from other areas to work in the factory and there being occasional opportunities for interaction, there was the added attraction for the boys of meeting new non-Epervár females. When telling me about the factory work this boy mentioned that while working there he had met a girl, but she sadly had a boyfriend; a week later, with an irrepressible smile he told me that the girl was now his girlfriend.

The majority of the work was women’s work as it required nimble fingers to sort out fruit and vegetables as they moved along a conveyor belt. While I was there the team was sorting frozen blackberries. Under ripe, too small or rotten ones had to be removed from the section of belt nearest to you and thrown into the middle section where a channel carried these rejected fruit away. Only perfect berries could be left on the conveyor belt that fed the packing boxes. By the time four pairs of hands had sorted the berries a stark few survived to the packing and packaging process. Two men positioned at the bottom end of the belt would pack the perfect berries, while one man stood at the top end of the belt emptying the



berries down onto the conveyor belt. Four women stood on either side of the belt, stooped slightly, never able to raise their eyes from the relentlessly passing berries as they tried to keep up with the pace as set by the moving belt and the man emptying the berries by the box load. The last stage of the process was the weighing and packing of the berries. At the end of the shift the whole place had to be cleaned. Machines and conveyor belts were scrubbed down, berries and sodden cardboard were collected from the floor before it was mopped down. Afterwards, the workers congregated briefly, waiting for the signal that the place was properly clean, before leaving the compound. While this was the daily routine for most of the team occasionally men would be individually removed by one of the managers to work in another section of the factory. Zoltán showed me his hands, stained red and cut by many small incisions, the product of a shift cutting plums in half in another area of the factory. As the workers left the factory enclosure, bags had to be opened so that a guard could check the contents to make sure that no-one had stolen anything.

Even wrapped in layers of trousers, jumpers, coats and hats, it was a cold environment in which to work. Officially everyone was to wear a plastic cap, an apron and gloves. In the cold the gloves were essential. Only thin plastic they quickly ripped and then one could really appreciate the protection that they had offered from the frozen berries. I asked permission to take photographs of the team and expected a negative reply as the factory was employing these people by-passing government regulations. However I was allowed, but only when everyone was correctly attired in their proper gear. With everyone properly dressed, in aprons and hats, the machines were stopped and everyone gathered together for the photos, the strict, frosty boss instantly melting as she smiled and encouraged me to take photos of the factory. Then we all returned to work.

Talking was not permitted, so there were only occasional hushed conversations between women standing side by side. Overseeing us all was the strict *Magyar* boss and any louder conversations drew a sharp telling off from this school mistress type figure, so everyone worked quietly, just carrying on low, personal conversations. Opposite me on one shift was a *Magyar* lady who recounted how her husband had incredulously questioned her “You are going to work with *Cigánys*?” when she had told him of her work plans. Standing with the only other

non-Romany woman they discussed the problems of too little money and no employment prospects, a conversation I had heard so often among the Romany women. The money people have is simply not enough to buy things from the shop and turns every trip into a struggle and a balancing act. The work that Katalin provides, for all its faults (temporary, unregistered, low pay), is a precious source of income.

## **2.4 Winter**

### **2.4.1 Caning**

The winter was dominated primarily by lack of employment opportunities. However, there was one avenue of work available and this was cane work. Surrounding Epervár were acres of cane. It stretched as far as the eye could see and covered great sheets of the region. I was told that years before there had been a forest and a river bordering the settlement, but that the Mayor, to stop the Roma from stealing wood from the forest, had ordered that all the trees be cut down, thus creating a rather bleak plain of cane. Much of this cane was on common ground which the local government auctioned every year to secure rights to working the land for the coming winter season. A group of Romany men, the same three who refused to speak to me, joined together to vote as one every year and annually out-bid any competition. These men are successful entrepreneurs who, like Katalin, offer seasonal labour throughout the rest of the year for groups of people. In autumn for example a work team of men were harvesting onions under the leadership of one of the men. Katalin makes no financial contribution to the cane auction. She does not act as an 'entrepreneur' through the winter, but rather her sons work for the men who control the land. Katalin utilizes the strategy of gift giving, discussed below, as a way of maintaining good relations with these entrepreneurs in an effort to ensure that her close *testvér* continue to be employed. This gift-giving was noticeable as Katalin rarely entered the settlement proper but did so to present these strategic gifts. "I rest during the winter," said Katalin, "cook and keep house, while during the summer I work non-stop". She is able to do this as her children pay her winter household bills, acknowledging her essential role as work provider during the rest of the year. The cane is a profitable export business. The cane is exported to Holland where it is used to thatch houses and make fences, and is often also used in the manufacture of furniture.



Teams of workers drive out to places where there is work. In the winter, Katalin's male close *testvér* are instructed on a daily basis as to which area of land they should work on, and they collect their wages every week in accordance to how many cane bundles they each made that week. While the men travel together, rest and joke together, this is much more individual work with each man working with a sizable pile of cane which he sorts and bundles on 'his own' patch of ground. Cane work consists of cutting the cane and sorting it into bundles according to size, but increasingly machines are being used for the cutting process. In Karcag (an hour's drive from Epervár), where I went working with Katalin's group of close *testvér*, *Magyar* men cut and delivered the cane using a very impressive modern machine. The Epervár Roma had to then organize the cane into bundles. Further along in the cane land two men from the town itself, who had secured rights to a small area of cane and were working by hand cutting the cane with a scythe. The Epervár team was part of a sleek operation, and the hand-working twosome were representing an out-dated, and not so profitable, mode of cane work.

Working in frosty conditions this is demanding work. Hands get cut from sorting the cane with its razor like edges. While I was urged to wear gloves, none of the men did, as gloves created a barrier and unnatural feel to the work. The men worked at their own pace, knowing that they were working for themselves, and that what they did would translate directly into wages at the week's end. With weather conditions unpredictable the men hope for clear frosty days as rain means that work is not possible, and with whole families relying on these wages, missed work days are not good. "Don't work because you want to, work because you have to, Fran!" "We have to work to eat". "If it rains we can't work and our families don't eat". Against this background was a jovial atmosphere. A radio was placed on top of a car and *Danubius Rádío* filled the air as we worked. The men stopped for one break during the day, but working at one's own pace meant that rests could be taken as desired, so one young man took advantage of this and frequently retreated to the car for salami and bread.

Per "*mini*" bundle, one made from the smallest stalks of cane (approximately one and a half to two meters in length), a worker receives 36 HUF, for the larger

“*eszport*” bundles, 65 HUF is paid. One young man claims to be able to make 20,000 to 26,000 HUF a week.

## **2.5 Individual Initiatives**

Within Epervár there are a number of individual Romany enterprises. One long-term business belongs to Ödön, an older man who works in his well-kept, enclosed garden making brooms to sell at 270 HUF each. This is another old Romany occupation as we can see from this extract referring to Roma under the Ottoman Empire, “There were Gypsy broom-makers, chimney-sweeps, musicians, dancers, bear-leaders and, above all, smiths in the various celebrations which took place at the circumcision of a grandson of Murad III in 1582” (Fraser, 1995:176). He does not work with a team of men, but just has the help of the mother of one of his granddaughters (a household member) who collects sticks for him to make into the brooms. Other men don’t join him in this venture because they are “lazy” and “prefer to steal”, he claimed. Pointing vaguely down towards the main body of the village he said how he wanted to move in there, that they would sell up. As he complained about the Romany settlement and its inhabitants I wondered what exactly he was trying to tell me. So often I had heard these sentiments: disparaging comments about fellow Roma, an attempt to distance oneself from neighbours, disclaimers about Romany origins. Yet not once did these comments ring true and on nearly every occasion there followed a declaration of the opposite view and, if questioned, a true allegiance to the settlement and their Romany neighbours. Here it is sufficient to say that Ödön, sitting on his stool in his beautiful garden, as his family (*család*) worked around him, with extremely loud music blasting from his stereo, greeting passers-by, was by all accounts, the contented king of his castle. This broom business was a source of income and a source of pride.

Other activities were more erratic and short-lived. One young man, upon release from prison, established a scrap metal business. Two old cars were bought, dismantled and sold as scrap metal – a small, one-off enterprise. Similarly, cheap corn was bought (although rumour says that such corn is stolen) and sold on to other villagers, including *Magyars*.



Melinda has two sons from her first marriage. These young men (nineteen- and twenty-one-years-old) live in the nearby tourist town of Szilvaszék, where Melinda comes from and where her mother still lives. Szilvaszék is an attractive town that attracts thousands of wealthy foreign tourists, mainly from other regions of Hungary, Germany and Poland, who travel there for the hot, natural spring water that has been channelled into numerous baths. It has successfully capitalized on this water to create a tourist resort which, in the summer, offers a cheap, lively nightlife and plenty of cheap restaurants (cheap for the Poles and Germans, expensive for most Epervár inhabitants). While able to appreciate aspects of Szilvaszék, this town appeared to me as tacky and relentless, while for the Epervár Roma it is the height of beauty and pleasure. The Epervár Roma ranked Szilvaszék as the top place to be. It is also home to cheap clothes shops and local administration offices, so Epervár people often take the bus, or car, in to the town to shop and sort out business. Melinda's sons had no steady employment but were involved in many deals and exchanges, and at times the goods would filter through to Epervár.

On one occasion Melinda was given a substantial number of silver rings and necklaces by the younger of the two sons. She promptly took them throughout the settlement, selling them for 300 HUF each. A very reasonable price, with Melinda making a 100% profit. As detailed in an earlier chapter, business was good and a number of women wanted to buy something, but few had money on hand so promised to pay when the family benefit (*családi pénz*) arrived. Melinda handed the jewellery over on trust, agreeing to collect the cash later.

On another occasion the two sons brought to the village, along with a tape recorder, a child's bicycle. Their father, Melinda's ex-husband (a non-Rom), had moved to Holland for business and had sent over these as gifts to his sons. The bike was a beautiful, good quality, child's bike. Brightly coloured and with a horn it was a toy the likes of which had never been seen before in the settlement. Melinda's son made an impressive bid to have it as his own, but as an over-weight six-year-old with his own metal frame bike, it was totally inappropriate for him. Instead, Rózsi's three-year-old daughter took possession of it, pushing it round the street (despite urges that she should sit on it), and so followed an interesting exchange. While Rózsi remained her quiet, meek self, István, her husband and

László's brother, walked into László and Melinda's house holding aloft 3,000 HUF. This he boldly handed to Melinda, with a glint in his eye, and would not listen to her protests that it was too little. "That's the money for the bike". Melinda said that she could get double that for the bike from someone else in the village, but István was determined, and walked out leaving the payment. "You'll have to give him back the money, Rózi," said Melinda, saying she would not accept the low price. However, the situation resolved itself when István returned with a further couple of thousand HUF. Again, bold and publicly he handed over the cash to a triumphant Melinda.

Tamás experimented and branched out on his own bike assembling and selling business venture when I was there, although he told me he was an old hand at such metal-based business activities. Tamás bought scrap metal bikes, disassembled parts of bikes, from a *Magyar* acquaintance for 50,000 HUF. He managed to do this by saving some of the family benefit and paying for the scrap bikes in two instalments of 25,000 HUF. Unfortunately this venture hit difficulties early on. Selling only four bikes at about 3,000 HUF each, business dried up as the bikes were all missing essential inner tubes and valves. While the inner tubes could be bought, Tamás was unable to find the valves needed. There was a shortage throughout the village which had led people to steal the valves from one another. Bikes were sitting, deflated and useless, because the valves necessary to keep the air in, had been taken. Dávid, László and Melinda's young son, had been spotted removing them from bikes, trying to find one for his own bicycle, and in the process deflating the tyres on other people's bikes. Rather than being annoyed at the child's antics, people viewed them with good humour. Once I met Tamás cycling home from an unsuccessful search for the valves in Almáshely, a nearby town a thirty minute cycle ride away. It was very disheartening to see the business stumbling as great effort and a substantial amount of money had been invested in this enterprise.

## 2.6 Musicians

Romany musicians have a long history and tradition and there continue to be influential and famous Romany musicians in Hungary, yet at the village level the importance of music as a livelihood has diminished. Appreciation and enjoyment of music is a pivotal feature of the Epervár Romany community – playing loud



music, both popular and traditional, Romany and non, from a stereo is a feature of Epervár *Cigány* life – but the playing of musical instruments is no longer a significant source of income. However, there are still individuals in Epervár who play and perform. It is casual labour and the musicians seem to be primarily fuelled by their passion as bookings are infrequent and the pay low. During the winter months Zoltán, Katalin's son, sang and played his synthesizer every Friday and Saturday evening at a small Almáshely pub (although he chose to give this up when fights started to become a frequent occurrence). One evening, accompanied by Zoltán's wife, I went to listen, record and photograph. The pub was a typical drinking place: the preserve of men. The music was a mixture of familiar Romany songs (played from all stereos, at every ball and at every party in the village settlement), and Hungarian songs. There was a definite, but not hostile, split down the very small bar. At one side sat the middle-aged, worn-faced, regular *Magyar* clients, while on the other sat the Roma. As the evening progressed the men clamoured and argued for "their" songs and Zoltán had to diplomatically play for both his audiences. Once home I asked which type he preferred playing, "Either, so long as they come from the heart". This attitude to music, its spirit-lifting quality, is a phenomenon of the Romany community.

One session, from 7p.m. to about 11 p.m., earned Zoltán a couple of thousand HUF. Another musician friend of mine, József (a cousin of László's), played much more occasionally, but for larger audiences. For example he played the synthesizer and sang at the 2000 Epervár *Cigány* Christmas Ball with his father, who sang too and played the guitar. With a friend József played at a famous hotel in Debrecen for New Year for 20,000 HUF and later in the year the same duo performed at a wedding. This irregular and infrequent work does not generate enough money to live off, especially as both men invest some of their earnings in acquiring newer and better keyboards. Zoltán works daily with his brothers, playing in the evenings as an extra. He said that the evening music sessions gave him an opportunity to "switch off". József, meanwhile, is a diabetic who receives disability allowance and so the occasional musical performances are the only work he does. The fact that their music is primarily a love is obvious as József blasts his music through the open windows of his house, or as we congregate for an evening singing session at Zoltán's. Zoltán and József, not considered *testvér*, would at times meet and play together in the evenings. Showing off new

equipment to each other, the men's mutual love of music and performance overshadowed and rendered insignificant normal *testvér* loyalties. While money is not the driving force of this activity, it is an important factor. With the local minority self-government refusing to pay József to play at one of the spring balls, József refused to play.

### **3 Impact of Entrepreneurship on the Community**

The income raised from these activities is vital to the community. Before moving on to analyze the features that entrepreneurs share, I shall summarize the effect of hamstering on the settlement inhabitants in terms of living standards. Viewed as the most profitable of these activities, hamstering injects substantial money into the community over a short period of time.

Katalin, living in a big house bordering the Romany settlement, yet importantly *outside* the settlement, told me how the money raised from the first hamstering season in 1982 provided her and others with enough capital to move beyond the settlement and into grander houses. The Roma had been forced to live in the settlement on the edge of the village, which had been a water land area where cattle were kept, as they were disliked and mistrusted by the *Magyars*. However, relations improved during communism and when in 1982 families were able to make the move out of the settlement, there were no great objections. So in this instance the hamstering money allowed a significant change to take place in Epervár.

On a smaller scale the money earned from the 2001 spring season allowed home improvements to be made within the settlement. László and his wife installed gas. While expensive to install, bills are relatively cheap and it is definitely more user friendly than the old wood burning heater. In the winter the process of cutting wood and bringing it indoors had been an unnecessary hardship for László and his wife since László's operation. Another home improvement was to a friend of mine's house. Living with his two brothers and their respective wives in a two-roomed house, my friend was able to use his hamster money to build a small extension in which to sleep. This same young man, at the May Day village fair, told me how he had started a post office savings account into which he was going



to put his hamstering money profits, "So now I shall have money in the winter". Days before, László and Melinda had similarly shown me their new post office account, with obvious pride. In it was the money that they were going to use for the gas installation. The idea that *Cigánys* are unable to save was a recurring theme in the village and these people proudly used their hamstering money to negate this pre-conception. A saving account was a statement of intent and embodied an attitude of long-term thinking and planning – in the popular mind antitheses to what it is to be *Cigány*.

There were also noticeable changes in women's clothing and jewellery that spring. With the men out working for the greater part of the day the women congregated at Melinda's house (in a, for me, frankly oppressive atmosphere as they sat and gossiped) and so I was able to hear and see what the hamster money had brought them. One poor, heavily pregnant, young woman spoke of at last being able to buy new shoes for her two year old son. Other women looked radiant in their new, brightly floral-patterned, summer dresses and gold necklaces, either newly purchased or bought out of the pawn shop. There was an atmosphere that at last things were possible. István's wife, Rózsi, sat awkwardly in this atmosphere of self-congratulation as her husband, while earning good money, spent most of it gambling.

Diet and lifestyle is determined to a large degree by income and 2,000 HUF provides the bare minimum for a household. I was told that if multiple household members work, accumulating their pay, then these low daily wages can be used more productively. Melinda used this rationale to justify not going out to work as neither László nor their six-year-old son was able to work and her income alone would make no significant difference. Erika used it to try and persuade her thirteen-year-old daughter to accompany her working during the summer school break. Those members of Erika's family (*család*) that live in the same home contribute their wages to the household budget, in effect giving their wages to Erika who, as the female head of household, decides what to buy, balancing that week's spending. Erika's household is composed of herself, her diabetic husband, parents and two daughters of school age (thirteen and nine-years-old respectively). The contributions that she receives are spasmodic. Once I was at Erika's home as she cajoled her thirteen-year-old daughter to join in the harvesting. The daughter

refused, however, and so for another day just the parents were bringing in money. If Erika had managed to coerce her daughter into working there would have been an extra 2,000 HUF to the household budget. Her oldest daughter had moved that spring to live at the other end of the village with her fiancé, so while she no longer needed to be fed by her parents, nor was she contributing to the household income. Children were not forced to work by their parents. While thirteen may seem young to western European notions of working age, children within the community took on positions of responsibility at an early age and, in a climate of poverty, money for food was of paramount importance.

One poor man, Tamás, a hard working and gentle father and husband, talked to me one afternoon about his failing bike business and, more generally, about his life and views. A trained stonemason, as a young man he had worked in Budapest carving statues and gravestones. “Why did you give that up?” I asked, seeing the pride in his manner as he talked of this skill. A shrug, “I was young” and I was left to add “and foolish” in my own head. “But why to Epervár?” I probed. It had been the hamstering. László who had lived and worked in Budapest seduced Tamás into accompanying him to the village with tales of the money-making hamstering business. Nowadays he doesn’t go hamstering as he says the work is too difficult and demanding for too little pay, preferring instead to work alone on his personal projects. He does not think it is worth it to “walk so much for 3,000 HUF”. Tamás had subsequently fallen in love with a Epervár young lady and stayed. Now the father of three children, his life is firmly rooted in the village. Noticeably, however, he is one man who prefers to work alone. Having moved into the village from outside, he has no *testvér*, other than in-laws, and therefore no obvious network to draw on for work expeditions. In the large garden of his corner home he could be seen diligently working alone, sometimes with the help of his twelve-year-old son and more occasionally with his father-in-law. So, hamstering has affected the courses of individuals’ lives, as well facilitating more marked changes to the face of Epervár.



## **4 Features of Entrepreneurs**

To appreciate and understand how these business initiatives function, I shall identify common features that the successful entrepreneurs share. Not everyone wants to be an entrepreneur and, I suggest, not everyone has the personality and ability to become one. The entrepreneurs must be able to act as team leaders with the responsibility of organizing a work force, directing their co-workers, encouraging a work-conducive environment and distributing wages. With access to the necessary equipment, local *Cigány* entrepreneurs are self-confident with a flair and enthusiasm for exploiting and creating business opportunities. Through the perspective of business strategies, I shall re-examine the relationship between *Magyars* and *Cigánys* and argue that using strategies such as gift-giving, the Romany entrepreneurs are able to create and maintain essential contacts with *Magyars*. In this section, I discuss these attributes before commenting on the wider social and financial impact that these business activities have on the community.

### **4.1 Leadership**

In group activities, a leader with the skills and qualities to motivate, direct and order the group of workers is vital. The leader's character must be such that they are able to build relationships of trust and mutual respect. There are no contracts in these employment arrangements, all agreements are informal, so therefore personal relations and trust are emphasized. Katalin herself attributes one of the major reasons to her success as a business woman to her personality which people easily warm to. A good communicator, she is able to put people at ease. As she recalled, my immediate response to her was positive and I was more than happy to be embraced and made a part of her close family (*család*), and that quality is something that she is aware of and believes helps her in her business activities. Similarly, the entrepreneur Pál, who also organizes work for large numbers of people, has such personable instincts. Aware of the importance of these attributes and skills, Katalin has decided that it should be her son-in-law, Gazsi, who will take over the business as he has a very attractive manner and, according to Katalin, has learnt a lot from watching her in action. "He has learnt how important it is to know when to shout at workers, and knows that most often shouting is not necessary. Continually asserting one's position as leader is unnecessary, rather a



feeling of equality is important". Katalin recognizes that Gazsi's personal qualities will make him a more effective leader than her own sons.

One aspect of Katalin's style of leadership is to encourage an outward, positive atmosphere of equality. The settlement feeling of good will and joviality is transferred, to an extent, to the workplace.<sup>121</sup> While working the atmosphere of equality and comradeship is tangible and Katalin, as leader, plays a decisive role in creating and maintaining it. When hoeing, Katalin directed who should work on which rows, before herself taking up a hoe and working alongside the team. As the day drew to a close the extended family (*testvér*) group began singing. As songs over-lapped and voices rose to support one another, there was created a real feeling of comradeship, and despite the long hours under a desperately bright summer sun, our toilings became insignificant. On another occasion, as we made our way homeward hoeing the last long strip of land, the group had sung rounds of *Cigány* songs. Loud, brash and confident the Romanian and Hungarian voices united in the old favourites, and the sound and atmosphere was uplifting. We fell quiet as Katalin sang a Hungarian ballad, listening respectfully. "Can't my mum sing well?" my friend proudly urged as we worked and listened. Similarly travelling back on the bus from a night shift at the factory everyone was tired, but happy. Sitting together in the dark the radio was put on and people began singing. Spirits were high, people sang, chatted and joked, food was eaten and exchanged, and again there was a spirit of togetherness. I mentioned this later to Katalin, who smiled, pleased that I had picked up on it, "Yes, singing, music and talking: these are important". Katalin recognized the importance of allowing a level of good natured relaxation and demonstrated leadership skills in her ability to preside over this balance of hard work and jovial spirits – contrasting with the strict *Magyar* factory floor boss who tolerated no interaction.

Katalin is responsible for guaranteeing a sufficiently large, suitable and reliable work force for the job. As recruitment for such casual work is through personal contact and word of mouth, Katalin organizes a work force by approaching those

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<sup>121</sup> See the earlier comment on the 'Gypsification' of the work place. The regime in the factory that the Epervár Roma worked at was strict in so far as talking during shifts was forbidden. Indeed, I was reprimanded and separated from my friend for talking. Unable to do so in the work place, the journey to and from the factory was therefore an important time for the workers to re-claim their sense of self through chatting, joke-telling and sharing food.



people whom she believes will be interested in work and whom she knows to be reliable, efficient workers. While working one shift in a factory where frozen blackberries were packaged I heard a lady asking permission to bring a young girl to work in the future, if her mother agreed, "She's clean, she isn't dirty". Katalin, hearing this, agreed that the girl in question could come.<sup>122</sup> Before a previous shift, as we gathered waiting for the bus to arrive and drive us to the factory, a young lady from the settlement wandered up. With her sleek long hair hanging wet down her back and fashionably attired in platform shoes, she was inappropriately dressed for an eight hour shift of constant standing in freezing conditions. "If I had known she was coming to work", neighbours who'd seen her walking down said "I would have told her to go back and change....I assumed she was going into Debrecen". Katalin had to tell her to return home, coming again when she was better dressed for long hours in freezing conditions. This woman must have heard of work, the time and place of meeting through a third person who had failed to tell her of the environment. Katalin makes sure to tell all prospective workers of what the work will involve when she goes out personally gathering workers.

László, as leader of a smaller hamstering team, must also guarantee that his work force is reliable and suitable for the job. László's position was unique in so far as he continued to play an active part in small business enterprises despite his physical disability. The consequences of László's amputation were potentially devastating for a man for whom being able to drive and for whom physical labour had always been important sources of income. Added to the pragmatic problems were the associated feelings and the reality of loss of manhood stemming from the loss of leg. In a gender-orientated society where to provide for one's children and wife, to protect them and to be virile and active were the makings of what it is to be a man, László was in an awkward and potentially humiliating position. Manliness plays a pivotal role in the Epervár Romany social setting. For men, manliness is what it is to be human, yet László, to a great extent, overcame the difficulties posed by his amputation in inspirational ways. One of these was that, while unable to work the land himself, he continued to manage a hamstering team

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<sup>122</sup> This reference to the girl's cleanliness is a reference to her morally sound status (see Chapter Two).

and continued to play a pivotal role in its operation, earning himself a substantial profit.

László demonstrated the personal characteristics of a leader: he maintained order, directed contemporaries and elicited respect in a good natured atmosphere. László was continually cheerful despite the boredom of sitting outside in depressing weather conditions while the other men laboured outside for hours at a time. He spent his time fixing broken flags by re-attaching pieces of plastic to them and would watch the men's progress through a monocular. Once home he would join in the skinning process, which was done outside his house, Melinda supplying the grease that the men use protect their hands as they skin and warm water afterwards to wash their hands. Coffee was always offered and food too if there was some prepared. The men met at László's twice daily, returning home during the break to eat, and going home often late in the day anticipating the food cooked for them during the day by their wives.

Before the operation László had hamstered annually so had a supply of equipment, traps and drying racks, as well as contacts with *Magyar* farmers who had granted László express permission to work their land. Therefore, László 'owned' rights to certain sections of land, a vital component of the business. These attributes, in the hamstering business, are prerequisites to leading a team. Also necessary in bringing together a team is access to a car, something that László dealt with. To pay for the amputation operation and for consequent living expenses, László and his wife Melinda had been continually selling off items from their house. One such belonging sold was their car, yet László knew that for the hamstering business a car was vital. While the state, through the health authorities had promised László money to buy an automatic car with column gear changes that he could legally drive, it was unknown when the money would arrive, so László bought himself a small, white Lada (the preferred model of the settlement) with which to go hamstering. He was able to buy this car, for 50,000 HUF, by pawning all of his and his wife's gold jewellery and from a loan from his brother, which would eat up their first income. Added to this was the cost of insurance, a Green card (*zöld kártya*), altogether an additional 10,000 HUF. A Green card was necessary for the car to be driven legally, but the problem was that only a police office in one of the larger towns had the authority to issue such a card. One



morning we took the road to the nearby town of Szilvaszék hoping to get a Green card. On route a car flashed us, the normal warning that there were police ahead. We swerved immediately onto the grass verge, everyone scared. The fear was palpable. "I am scared", László confided as we sat in the car on the verge wondering what action to take. No one wanted to meet the police, so we sat in the car until a car coming from the opposite direction was successfully flagged down. The car was pulling a trailer piled high with old furniture, "Good, Almáshely *Cigány*", said my relieved companions as the car drew to a halt and confirmed that indeed there were police ahead. So, we re-started the engine, turned the car, and drove home. In fact, László later made it to Szilvaszék but was refused a Green card because of the car's unsatisfactory condition and in the end the *Magyar* man from whom László bought the car went to the main city of Debrecen, where the police did not insist on seeing the vehicle in question, and obtained the card for László.

László, as well as providing the essential components necessary for hamstering (the car, the traps, petrol), also organized and directed the team members. While it could be argued that László's presence out of doors simply took away manpower as with only one leg he was unable to take part in the work of searching for holes and traps, he saw himself as fulfilling a necessary role as director. Bringing me, whose burrow prognosis was always double checked and who needed help setting the traps, or his six-year-old son, simply added to the lack of man power. Yet this did not seem to bother László or his core team of workers.

The leader is also responsible for distributing wages. With no formal contract, this arrangement relies heavily on trust. In the cases of hamstering, hoeing and factory work the leaders guarantee a set day wage. (In hamstering this rises according to the size of the catch. Caning and vegetable collecting are paid according the individual's efforts, i.e. how many bundles of cane made and how many sacks of onions collected.) In these situations, the leader take upon him/herself the responsibility of paying a minimal wage irrespective of overall profit. For example, if few hamsters are caught, László must still pay his workers the promised rate and the cost of the petrol. As hamstering is a fairly precarious business, this is a risky position for the hamstering team leader to put himself in. László paid each of his team members a basic daily wage which rose according to



the number of hamsters caught and their experience in the business. One man who László said was an experienced hamster worker was receiving 4,000 HUF a day, while his two team mates were paid 3,500 HUF each. One day when László's team caught the most in Epervár, 131 hamsters, the men's pay increased to 5,000 HUF. Over a thirteen day period László himself earned 140,000 HUF. With the comings and goings of team members, László was regularly only paying two co-workers at 3,500 HUF a day each. From my calculations László's profit of 140,000 HUF is half of the money raised over a thirteen day period (in that same period a co-worker earned 45,500 HUF). He justified this relatively large pay, compared to his fellow workers, by saying that the traps, access to land, knowledge and car are all his and he pays for the petrol. László stopped hamstering at the end of the season when he was no longer making a sufficient profit from the outings. There would come a point when László was making a loss, but the leader disbands the work team as soon as this stage seems possible.

I accepted that László's system of pay distribution was normal, but the wife of a car owning man who organized his own team, told me that this is not usual practice. Erika's husband, according to Erika, divided all profits equally. "That's how we are, we *Cigánys*. We help one another out". This statement was made knowing that I had heard something different, and deliberately played on a stereotype of Romany brotherhood.<sup>123</sup> A feud existed between these two close *testvér* groups apparently following an argument between Erika and Melinda, two female household heads. Despite the fact that László and Erika's husband are related, (Erika's husband's father is László's grandmother's brother), the very close friendship of Erika with the family who emigrated to Canada (László's brother's, Zsolt's, family) and Erika's husband acting as a father figure to László's brother's son from his first marriage, relations between the two groups was hostile. Erika and Melinda's close *testvér* avoided one another and it was only my friendship with both that brought to light these feelings (as happened on many occasions: I would befriend a close *testvér* group and would then be exposed to deep-seated, long-held grievances). In this case I was told I could not invite any members of that close *testvér* group to my birthday party and I was frequently

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<sup>123</sup> An idea that was only jokingly referred to on one other occasion, unlike the stress the Vlach Roma place on the egalitarian ideology of "Gypsy brotherhood" (Stewart, 1997:55-58) when profits are indeed split equally. On this occasion, "*Cigány*" was placed before the word "*testvér*" to emphasize the ethnic origin of the two men's relatedness, and thereby differentiating the usage of the word *testvér* from its more common form.



advised to avoid Erika's home as it was "dirty" (*piszkos*) and her father-in-law was "crooked" (*zsivány*). László was therefore my only reliable source about pay distribution methods. How pay in other teams is divided remains unclear, but László, with his methods and physical disadvantage, was still able to attract loyal workers and I never heard a complaint from these men that pay was too low. In fact, such a pay level was confirmed as normal by Tamás and another man who both refused to go hamstering because "3,000 HUF a day for that much walking, that much going out – it isn't worth it". While most men praised hamstering for generating a large income in a short period of time, others believed that the cold conditions and physical exertion were not worth the money.<sup>124</sup>

Gazsi also organized the brick making assignment. In this case, the daily wage was 3,000 HUF, food and one or two beers. Gazsi received a set price for the assignment from his contact who ordered the bricks, and Gazsi divided this evenly among the workforce that he recruited. Including alcohol as part payment is an interesting concept. Katalin attributed her successful business dealings in part to the fact that she did not allow her workers to consume alcohol while working. This is a deliberate policy that contrasts with work practices in neighbouring villages. Often workers are given shots of brandy, *pálinka*, as part of their daily wage. This means that the work organizers do not have to pay out so much money to their workforce, and the workers are permanently slightly inebriated and constantly poor, despite working full days. Katalin viewed alcohol as a dangerous ingredient in the workplace, leading to conflict and loss of productivity. Working out doors under the scorching summer sun a beer is an easy way to quench a parched throat, while a shot of *pálinka* in the frosty winter days warms the innards.

Maintaining a cohesive work force is part of the duties of a leader. As we saw, Katalin sent home one lady for aggressively questioning her authority and another young lady for turning up to work inappropriately dressed. László made comparable executive decision as team leader when a team member complained that he could not work with one of team mates any longer as he found the man's

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<sup>124</sup> People had their limit of what sort of work they would do for how much money. Melinda believed hoeing was too hard work for too small a financial reward, Sára thought the same of the freezing factory work and it was frequently said in the settlement that the *Magyars* employed in the Dignity Foundation supported pallet factory were working for very little pay – and that the *Cigány*s would refuse the work.

drinking and consequent obnoxious behaviour intolerable. He gave László the ultimatum that either he would leave or the alcohol drinker would have to. With the complaint directed at the “hamstering expert” of the team, were the grievances that simple and straightforward? Was the man resentful of his co-worker’s inflated pay, coupled then with his over-bearing attitude? Was there underlying resent that László dispersed wages ‘unfairly’ among the workers, leading to less enthusiasm amongst the team?

László chose to tell the alcohol drinker that he could no longer work in his team. He told me that one of the reasons that this man was no longer allowed to work with them was that, when drunk, he began to question the leadership decisions of László. Out working László would decide such things as which area of land should be worked next and whether traps should be left out for as further night in land which had yielded few hamsters. László resented this worker questioning his decisions, ultimately questioning László’s presence out of doors at all. If László was not needed as a leader, then he could stay at home, leaving his place in the car to be filled by an able bodied worker. By telling this man, an old friend of László’s, to leave, László solved a number of problems.

Out at the brick making site there was a similar display of leadership reinforcement. Attila, Donata’s brother, was a regular member of the work team. Cycling up to the site at noon, Gazsi shouted at him to go home. Attila ignored this warning and, leaving his bike, walked up to the site. Gazsi, in an uncharacteristic display of aggression, ran at Attila and gripping his neck, held him doubled over in a headlock. It was a violent and emotionally charged struggle. Gazsi was obviously very angry and Attila was clearly scared, shocked and hurt. The other workers, shouting, ran up to intervene and pulled the two apart. Attila jumped back on his bike and cycled home. However, as he cycled back he quickly regained his composure, brushing off my concerned questions and saying that it had been nothing. Arriving at Katalin’s house, I told András what I had seen. Laughing, he said that Attila had deserved it. According to András, Attila had inflamed an already existing grievance by not turning up to work that morning after having earlier made a disrespectful comment about Gazsi, hence Gazsi’s reaction was perfectly acceptable and was hardly worth talking about. The seriousness of this fissure came to light the following day when Attila



left to return to Romania. The next news of him was that he had been summoned to do his compulsory military service, and so I never saw him again. Gazsi had felt that Attila's attitude had been disrespectful – and as leader he had to make sure that his team workers were sufficiently respectful and obedient.

#### 4.2 Flair and Self-Confidence

What appears as an inherent self-confidence and initiative are necessary for instigating these income generating activities.<sup>125</sup> Katalin began her enterprises with her husband (who has since died) by calling all businesses in the region which may have needed a large, casual work force. Once securing work she travelled with about forty or so people to one work place, while her husband accompanied another forty to another place of work (large farms and factories). When her husband died she carried on, every year contacting businesses found in the local telephone book. In competition, Pál (one of the successful entrepreneurs who would not speak to me), then an ambitious and enterprising twenty-four-year-old, organized his own labour force offering to work for *Magyar* employers at a cheaper rate. Now, several years later, business thrives for both parties and relationships between themselves and the *Magyar* employers continue to be annually renewed and courted. When talking of her business acumen and why no such *Magyar* entrepreneurs exist, Katalin said that *Magyars* lack the flair and bold initiative needed. An inherent self-confidence is an attribute of the Romany community.<sup>126</sup> In business it is applied with particular effect.

This self-confidence is essential for opening up and seizing enterprise opportunities. Katalin remarked that *Magyars* simply do not have the flair to be business people like the Roma, that they lack some ungraspable attitude to life. Lampland's comment that *Magyars* are “not trained to be entrepreneurs” and “discouraged to take risks” (Lampland, 1995:341) supports Katalin's assessment.

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<sup>125</sup> Whyte explores this idea that leaders have ‘inherent’ qualities in his study of an Italian-American slum in ‘Street Corner Society’ (1943), in which he examines the results and atmosphere of bowling matches and argues, following Weber's (1968) analysis of charismatic authority, that these ‘inherent’ qualities are really created by others. Psychological tactics would encourage or discourage players, letting them know the sort of performance expected of him. In such a way results were manipulated, so that bowling “became the main vehicle whereby the individual could maintain, gain, or lose prestige” (1943:23). Likewise prominent people in the Romany community have their position continually re-stated and re-affirmed by their companions.

<sup>126</sup> Stewart discusses why this may be so with, linking the general Romany entrepreneurial spirit with their marginalized position (2001b).

It is important to not present a romanticized view of the economic situation of Epervár Roma, arguably forced to rely on their wits because conventional methods of securing an income have consistently failed them, yet self-confidence and belief in oneself is a consistent feature of individuals and of community life. This “vitality, zest... gusto” (Kaprow, 1991:127) are dominant features of Epervár *Cigány* life, and it is this gusto that initiates enterprise. In the cases of individual initiatives, people are making use of their limited resources and their understanding of their environment to make a profit. These small-scale enterprises rely on the same flair of initiative and confidence as the larger scale business enterprises. Tamás, a trained sculptor, turned his hand to bike assembling upon hearing of a “young lad” (*srác*) who had a load of old bikes for sale. In this case, there was an over-estimation of the local market for bikes and a shortage of essential bike components. Exploiting opportunities is the key to these ventures. For example, Melinda and László found that they had in their possession a stash of foreign currency. These notes were fairly old, hence no longer in circulation nor legal tender. Despite knowing this, Melinda and László were convinced that the currency exchange establishments in Szilvaszék would swap the old currency for Hungarian forints. Melinda’s brash self-confidence did not wane as she was turned down at each of the different currency exchange businesses. Similarly, a young man approached a Mercedes-driving taxi driver who had driven up into the settlement one evening with a mobile phone deal proposition. Despite the taxi driver’s lack of interest, made very clear by the driver showing his own superior mobile, the young man persisted in his persuasive sale tactics. On another occasion, in Szilvaszék to buy paint and do a few errands, we waited outside the block of flats of Melinda’s mother. László, István, József’s father and myself were waiting in the car park around which stand a collection of low level, grey apartment blocks. A Lada was parked close to where we stood. István took an interest in the car, giving it a superficial once-over, he commented that he would like to buy the car. “Does anyone know whose car it is?” he asked. No one around knew who the owner was, so István asked people walking in to and from the nearest block of flats if they knew to whom the car belonged. He was hoping that the owner would be found and that he would broker a deal in which he would buy the car. This idea was perfectly acceptable to everyone around, who did not question where this idea had sprung from – there being no sign on the car proclaiming it being for sale. Melinda’s sons did not recognize the car so could



not help either, and with no owner identified the deal never became more than an idea. At the same time, a dishevelled looking *Magyar* man was rooting through the outdoor, large, communal bins where the flat residents put their household waste. Commenting with a touch of humoured disbelief at the sorts of jobs people find themselves doing, István asked the man if he had found anything good. His questioning was both friendly and curious. This non-judgmental, yet interested attitude, was replicated by József's father who stood at the bins with the man, exchanging pleasantries, and taking a look for himself at what the bin held.

#### **4.3 Magyar Contacts**

Epervár Romany entrepreneurs rely heavily on forming and maintaining relations with those people who own and control the work force at factories and in farms and on those middlemen who sell on produce – and these people are invariably *Magyar*. Ethnicity is an obvious dividing line from which it is possible to analyze Romany economic business activities and their reliance on *Magyar* relations. The 'Magyar middleman' syndrome can be seen in many of the economic activities described above. The winter cane business has a multi-layered stratification. Every year the Local Government auctions land where cane grows, and successful bidders are able to work the land that following winter. Every October, a group of Epervár Roma form a coalition that bids as one at the auction, thereby securing land. The annual leasing fee for 20 hectares of cane land is 1.5 million HUF. The coalition can accumulate that much but cannot get enough for a sustainable operation. A sustainable operation would, for example, necessitate purchasing a harvester (rather than renting one) and such a machine costs 4 million HUF. Buying cane land would also require significant capital (unobtainable from banks without collateral – either an empty house or land which the Roma do not have). Therefore, the Epervár Roma are dependent on the *Magyar* middlemen who rent out the land and the machinery. As with the hamster fur, the cane follows a route abroad. The cane goes from Epervár and other surrounding villages to a wholesaler in Újváros, from there to another Hungarian wholesaler, and then to Germany and Holland where the cane is used for thatched roofs and for making furniture and fences.

Throughout the winter the Epervár Roma coalition direct teams of workers to specific parcels of land. Those people that work the land, cutting the cane and



sorting it by size, are paid by the bundle by their Romany employees. Those Roma at the bottom of this chain work under frosty, freezing conditions on winter days, sorting and bundling the cane by hand. As we saw, per “mini” bundle a worker receives 36 HUF, for the larger “eszport” bundles 65 HUF is paid. In contrast, the Rom who temporarily rents the land and directs teams of workers as to where to work that day, receives 250 HUF for each “mini” bundle and 600/700 HUF for the larger, and so their earnings are significantly greater. My contacts in the village did not know for how much profit the *Magyar* middlemen make, but are confident that each one makes a substantial profit. “Why do you not sell the cane abroad yourselves and cut out the middlemen?” I asked the man directing the team of Romany bundlers. “Because of this” was the reply, pointing to a dark complexion. Ideally for Katalin, a foreign investor would buy the cane land and let the Roma gain gradual ownership against present and future earnings. She envisages cutting out the middlemen and sees advertising on the internet as a step towards achieving this goal.

Hamstering is similarly reliant on *Magyar* middlemen. *Magyar* farmers own the land in which hamsters live and these farmers have to give permission to individual hamstering teams (mainly Roma) to work particular plots of land. Relations are necessarily fostered between the two parties as land rights need to be secured and maintained. While Romany people tend to dominate the hamstering scene – it was fantastic to drive through the deserted early morning countryside greeting, waving and jeering distant, but recognizable figures, as they worked their plot – *Magyars* were involved at this bottom level too. László often told me, with a strange mixture of pride and joviality that the local policeman, a *Magyar*, hamstered too. “He’s a smart man, you see. He knows how to make good money.” On a separate branch of this business enterprise the stretched and dried hamster furs are sold on to *Magyar* middlemen. At the beginning of the spring hamstering season a single, large skin was being bought for 400 HUF each, very good, fast money, yet as the weeks went on prices lowered. As the spring season drew to a close (early May), skins were said to be too small and of too low quality, so László’s usual buyer was offering only 200 HUF for skins shorter than 24 cm and the price for bigger ones dropped to 350 HUF due to alleged imperfections in the fur.



In these two businesses Roma fill the vital positions at the bottom of the chain doing the physical, outdoor labour for low pay. This work is extremely useful for the Roma as it supplies them with a source of income when they would otherwise have none. The casual and undeclared nature of the work also benefits the *Magyar* employer who can disregard official requirements and so pay no taxes and not contribute to employees' pension funds. Therefore wages remain low for the employer, while the workers receive minimal day wages, with no additional benefits. In relation to entrepreneurship, the significance lies in the fact that to be successful business people Roma must work in a relationship of cooperation and trust with non-Roma. Networks that reach beyond the Romany community are essential. The Epervár Roma, for all their pride in integration and mutual understanding between the two communities, on a daily basis have little to do with their non-Romany counterparts. Yet, when it comes to securing work, it is vital that members of the two communities are able to manipulate the very elastic, subjective boundaries. The *Magyar* shopkeeper of the settlement shop made a similar observation when she commented that one off business deals between local Roma and *Magyars* were one of the only occasions when there was interaction between the two communities. The categories *Magyar* and *Cigány* change in the context of economic strategies as they enter a mutually dependent relationship. The negative stereotypes of *Cigány* become irrelevant in mutually beneficial economic exchanges. In various instances of economic exchanges: *Magyar* women buying corn and mobile phones from *Cigánys*, *Magyars* selling milk and livestock to the settlement inhabitants, or *Magyars* working with *Cigánys* in the factories and out working for the council, ethnic divides would lose salience as the *Magyars* and *Cigánys* cooperated together. Those *Magyars* who have the most frequent contact with the local Roma through such deals are the ones who are most likely to defend the moral standing of their Romany neighbours.

When Katalin considers why she is a successful businesswoman, before mentioning her approachable disposition as a reason, she explains that her life experiences gave her a huge advantage. She has studied a lot, seen a lot, travelled around Hungary and regularly attended the Roma Parliament in Budapest. Brought up in a state children's home, Katalin returned to Epervár to find her relations, married an Epervár musician and settled in the village. Katalin attributes



her childhood as being an important factor in her consequent success. She was brought up in a state institution from the age of four and attended school and formed friendships without knowing her Romany roots. It was not until she traced her relations to Epervár did she discover herself to be *Cigány*, and she claims that it was then that everything fell into place, “Seriously, I had always been attracted to *Cigánys* when I was younger – and then I knew why”. Out of all the children in the home, thirty Macedonians, thirty *Magyars* and one other Rom, Katalin befriended the Romany child, unaware of her own ethnicity. Her education gave her opportunities unavailable to many Roma. After graduating from eighth grade she was able to take evening classes in a clothing technical qualification, while studying during the day at a trade school where she did a correspondence course. “I had nothing else to do but study”. Katalin had no other worries or responsibilities, so could study. Brought up in this state care environment her upbringing was very different to Romany women. It was her mother-in-law who taught her how to cook and care for her children – household tasks that Romany girls are fluent in by an early age. This upbringing meant that Katalin is able to communicate confidently with *Magyars*. Wherever she goes people say “You are not *Cigány!*” because of the combination of her pale skin, behaviour and way of speaking. She was socialized differently, giving her vital skills needed in business. And yet, it is many of the qualities that she considers ‘*Cigány*’ that give her the flair and ambition to be an entrepreneur. Katalin recognizes that her upbringing means that she is very different from those people who were born and brought up in Epervár. They may shop in Debrecen and go to discos in Szilvaszék, but that is the extent of their world. Katalin, however, has built on her unique upbringing and experiences. She is able to place Epervár in the wider picture, and has managed to carve herself a market niche which benefits a large number of poor, otherwise unemployed, Roma.

Another Epervár friend of mine was also raised in an orphanage. While poor and lacking many of the skills that contributed to Katalin’s business acumen, Barbara’s outlook on the world was a refreshing change to the general, insular Epervár way of thinking. She had, for instance, been on a trip to Germany, of which she still had photographs. She still wrote to former classmates, one of whom was studying in Debrecen University. She had played football as a child and had dyed her hair multiple colours, a self-confessed former tomboy. Barbara’s



brother lived in the nearby town of Hajdúhadház, a miserable place famous throughout Hungary for the high level of discrimination Romany inhabitants suffer, and called the “*Cigány* capital”. His life was not as fortunate as his sister’s, despite the fact that he had also been brought up in an orphanage. It is clear that it takes more than a childhood spent in an institution for Roma to overcome the possible pitfalls of life.

Katalin’s ability to pass into *Magyar* society was a major contributor to her success as business woman. This ability for Roma to pass (Kaminski, 1980; Silverman, 1988) is something that other community members also commented on as being important factors in their success.<sup>127</sup> Before László’s operation, every summer Melinda and László sold cooked corn to the tourists visiting Szilvaszék. Melinda talked affectionately about this business as she had enjoyed the work and it had been highly profitable.<sup>128</sup> Her application for a street-vending permit had always been accepted and she kept the patrolling police happy by offering them free corn on the cob. Her personal triumph however, was her belief that her customers did not realize that she was Romany. In her clean white overalls and with her fair skin, she felt that she was mistaken for a *Magyar*, and that that was the key to her success. Passing into *Magyar* society is one very important strategy for business success.<sup>129</sup>

#### **4.3.1 Best Strategies**

As these relationships between the Romany entrepreneurs and the *Magyar* middlemen is based on personal interaction, the Roma employ tactics to secure and nurture these relationships. In the following section I have identified a few of these strategies: good performance, sympathy and gift giving.

One way of keeping in good favour is to provide a quality service. Being able to provide a competent work force at short notice that works steadily in a range of

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<sup>127</sup> Wacquant (1993) makes a similar point in reference to the Red Belt inhabitants of France who can pass into French society, unlike their black counterparts in the U.S.A. who are hindered by their skin colour.

<sup>128</sup> Melinda explained that they made a 200% profit on selling the corn as they were able to buy it cheaply and sell it at a huge mark-up. I was told by others in the settlement that the huge profit was possible because the corn was stolen.

<sup>129</sup> The Vlach Roma of Hajnal’s study (2000) have developed this strategy to actually recruiting a non-Romany business partner (“*span*”) for certain situations in order to open up a wider market.



working conditions and environments, is a prerequisite to maintaining such working relationships. Obviously Katalin has built upon her reputation as a fair work provider. It is the individual's choice as to whether he or she turns up to work. Katalin informs more people than required of the work in an effort to ensure that enough people will show up. No contracts are signed and workers are under no obligations. Indeed, even Katalin did not know how long the team would be required, just knowing for definite that from mid-January a new team would be replacing them. It is all very casual. One late afternoon out hoeing, as the working day drew to a close, the landowner drove up in his car, getting out to chat to Katalin. "Hold your hoe with both hands", I was anxiously instructed. As the boss came up everyone changed their posture, intently holding their hoes and swiftly slicing weeds. One-handed hoeing was sloppy practice, overlooked as the day progressed, but once the boss, with his position of authority and air of strictness arrived, everyone took up their correct stance. The informal contract and casual nature of the employment arrangement means that keeping a good relationship with the boss is vital. The personal nature of the work arrangement and the fact that the boss has ultimate power in the relationship puts pressure on Katalin to continually impress in all the right areas. All of us working, heads down, hoes held tightly in both hands, was the correct picture to impress on the boss's mind.

There is a great emphasis on the personal nature of these relationships. László is very aware of the sympathy factor in regard to his amputated leg – aware of the better bargaining position it puts him in. On several occasions he travelled out with his brother on missions to negotiate with farmers over deals to buy melons and corn with the view to selling them on specifically to evoke the sympathies and more empathetic side of the farmer.

Gift-giving is another strategy for forming personal relationships.<sup>130</sup> I was at Katalin's house, relaxing with her close family (*család*) in the yard, when an employer came round to discuss business in a noticeably informal atmosphere. A hand of warmth is extended to all visitors, but perhaps this one had a more calculated edge. A gift brought from my Scottish parents on their visit was a bottle of Scotch whisky, an appropriate gift after months of Katalin's family discussing my Scottish heritage: my inherent fighting ability, my financial mean-spiritedness

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<sup>130</sup> Gift-giving is a strategy also used by the Frafra entrepreneurs (Hart, 1988).



and, of course, my love of whisky – a drink they bemoaned they had yet to sample. A few weeks later Katalin laughed at how strong and disgusting the whisky was and so it had been presented as a gift to one of the landowning employers. This is an example of an astute business move grounded in the importance of cementing business relations at a more personal level. Such transactions between Romany entrepreneurs and *Magyar* landowners took place at the lower level too. My neighbour, László, would bring gifts to the farmers who let him go hamstering on their land. For instance, a sweet cake, made by Melinda on special occasions such as Christmas and Easter, was wrapped and brought to the farmer. For László's household such gifts need balancing in the week's shopping accounts. So, not taken lightly, such gift giving was obviously done after careful prioritization.

László himself once benefited directly from such gift giving. Once the spring hamstering season was over László had no more need for his car so a deal was made with a non-Epervár Rom. The car was borrowed for 20,000 HUF, to be used for business purposes. A legitimate and fair deal was struck. Yet, in addition to the 20,000 HUF, László also received high quality gifts: a brand new looking sandwich toaster, a beautiful gold chain, clothes. László and his wife's pleasure and delight at these gifts was obvious. Gift giving as a personal element to exchange deals could be said to be institutionalized, yet the personal and surprise elements remain. These gifts solidify relationships and are based in respect between the two parties.

Gift giving as a strategy of building respectful working relationships between business partners contrasts to the contractual relations practiced in the mainstream business environment.<sup>131</sup> As this chapter and the previous section on lending and dealing have illustrated, the Roma are adept at fulfilling obligations. Lending within the community relies on no formal contract, but rather loans are repaid as agreed, for alternative reasons. In such a close-knit and interdependent community, to not repay would set one outside the network, a position that no woman can afford. As the following chapter shall demonstrate, the Dignity Foundation assumes a respect for the formal, legal contract that is somewhat

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<sup>131</sup> Hajnal (2000) notes that among Vlach Romany traders there are no written guarantees either.

misplaced. During my fieldwork, I had a similar experience to that of the NGO. Friends in the settlement asked for a substantial loan with which to buy a new television. They would, they promised, pay back the money on a certain date, and wrote and signed a contract to that effect. The date came and passed with no money exchanging between us. It became clear that 'the contract' we had signed had been a superficial reassurance for my benefit and had absolutely no constraining or obligatory meaning to the co-signatories. Before leaving the village at the end of my fieldwork, I wrote the debt off – a debt that my friends by that time no longer even considered as outstanding. For the Roma, cooperation is not defined by mutual obligations laid out in a contract, but by local processes of building relationships.

## **5 Conclusion**

This chapter has identified the features of successful local entrepreneurship. These features are a mixture of skills and strategies, with one of the most important being the ability to communicate effectively with *Magyar* middlemen. Katalin, due to her particular upbringing has the social capital to do this successfully. László, lacking the ability to pass, has devised his own strategy of initiating business partnerships by using his physical disability to gain sympathy. This strategy manipulates the stereotype of the poor and helpless Rom, and as such is one example of the familiar strategy of exaggerating behaviour to play up to stereotypes (see Hajnal, 2000). For those Roma that are unable to pass, this is one option available to them, but as Hajnal writes (2000) it is those Roma, such as Katalin, who are know the norms, values and opinions of the *Magyars*, and everyday *Cigány* life, who are the most successful business people.

While this chapter has identified local livelihood strategies that supplement families' regular income of state benefits (unemployment benefits, pensions and disability allowances), it would be wrong to create the impression that Hungarian Roma, if they have the appropriate skills in an enabling environment, are able to seamlessly move into the higher economic and social strata. It is well-documented that opportunities in the work place are restricted and, to an extent, defined, by discrimination. People I spoke to in Epervár had all experienced such discrimination in one form or another. A story that was oft-repeated, with only



small details differing, was that of a *Cigány* man being offered a job over the phone, only to be turned away when he appeared in person. Others, upon arriving at the worksite, would be told that the position had been filled, only for the *Magyar* behind in the queue to be offered the position. Katalin has a personal twist to this tale as she was the '*Magyar*' that was offered the job in preference to her dark-skinned son-in-law. NEKI (2000) documents cases of discrimination in employment procedures. For example, a young Roma who, while waiting for a job interview, overheard the receptionist tell the manager that "Some Gypsy girl is looking for you about the vacancy", to which the manager replied "I do not hire Gypsies here, I hate them all". The manager decided that she was not suitable for the job only on the basis of her ethnic origin. I questioned Gazsi, who had been promised work in Debrecen over the phone only to be turned away when he arrived, how he had responded. "I turned around, walked out and closed the door. It hurts my heart, but see how I am always happy? That's because there is nothing to be done and you can't let it get to you". This acceptance of the situation is reminiscent of Árpád's explanation as to why Roma have not risen up in rebellion despite their maltreatment, "They fight us with stones and we retaliate with bread. *Cigány* pride themselves on the love they feel for people, on their kindness towards other people, so to hurt people, whoever they may be, is contrary to their nature as individuals, a group, a culture". This interpretation of the situation is an attempt to paint a positive gloss on the Roma's powerlessness to alter this state of affairs.

András, nineteen-years-old and a manual labourer for three years, showed a dedication to work and personal qualities that could make him, with an astute, business-minded wife, a likely candidate to scale the economic ladder and begin to act as middleman. This could never be the case, Katalin sadly but pragmatically informed me, as her son, a Rom, would always be passed over in preference to a *Magyar*, irrespective of education or training. Katalin's expectations are supported by Kertesi's study (2003) that workplaces would rather employ *Magyars* who do not carry with them the same perceived uncertainties as Roma. In such work places where casual, unskilled labour is required, wages are low and schooling is not necessary, employers just want to fill positions with workers who are most likely to do the job, and racist stereotypes dictate that it is therefore better not to employ Roma.

Those Roma that are able to overcome these barriers often do so at the sake of their Romany identity. For example, Katalin's sister-in-law who married a *Magyar* and moved out of the settlement to be proprietor of the local disco, and with no financial incentive to cooperate with the settlement inhabitants, stated that she was not a Rom in the latest census and banned Roma from her disco. In such a way, she deliberately distanced herself from her ethnic background. It is telling however that, walking past her house in the main body of the village, she occasionally could not refrain from the characteristic calling from an open window to young *Cigány* women, "You are looking really pretty!" (*Jó csinos vagy!*), and she was still subject to gossip in the settlement. On the other hand Katalin, who is reliant on the local Romany workforce, has positioned herself as slightly distanced from, but still with links to, the settlement. If Katalin were to fully sever ties; it is likely that she would lose her workforce. For her, maintaining a *Cigány* identity is therefore a crucial aspect of her business activities. I therefore suggest that there are barriers preventing most Roma from realizing their full business potential.

As is clear from the above section, ethnicity and majority-minority relations have an important role in the individual's ability to act as a successful entrepreneur. Katalin and Melinda are aware, and to an extent proud, of their ability to pass into *Magyar* society, and through that route be able to earn money. The obvious flip-side to this is that those people that are unable to pass into mainstream society because of characteristics that label them as undesirable *Cigány*, are limited in their economic interactions by their ethnic status.



## **Chapter Five**

### **The Dignity Foundation**

#### **1 Hungarian Civil Sector**

The Dignity Foundation, registered as an independent private foundation in 1990, is an example of an NGO established in the initial stages of the transformation of Hungary's political, social and economic landscape. In 1989, following the government decree that foundations that met the requirements of the Civil Code (1987) need not be approved by the government but only had to be registered by the county courts, there were an estimated 800 NGOs in Hungary (Siegel and Yancey, 1992). As discussed previously, in Hungary during the 1980's voluntary associations were tolerated and, although subject to close government regulation and mainly restricted to sports and recreation and voluntary fire-fighting (Cox and Vass, 2000), these associations laid the foundations for the present day Hungarian civil sector. The predominance of such associations in today's third sector (40% of NGOs work in the field of sport and recreation) is due to this historical legacy (Sebestény, Kuti, Toepler and Salamon, 1999). However, according to statistics published in 1999, this balance has been changing as NGOs working in the areas of community development and housing increase in size, while those working in the traditional areas diminish (Sebestény et. al., 1999), hence indicating a more varied and dynamic civil sector. The Hungarian civil sector is now one of the strongest in the region,<sup>132</sup> having grown rapidly in the decade following the change of regime.<sup>133</sup> Despite several ongoing debates concerning regulations pertaining to the civil sector and a general consensus that a comprehensive package of regulations must be introduced to ensure the continued development of an independent civil sector, the overall impression is that "there has been a remarkable post-transition growth in civil society organizations" (Ringold, Orenstein and Wilkens, 2003:94). As in the case of the Dignity Foundation, many of the new social and economically focused NGOs were established by anti-Communist dissidents who had been active during state socialism and returning *émigrés* who wanted to positively participate in the transition (Trehan, 2001:136). Such foundations aim to provide support and services according to principles and values that are different from the old regime (Cox and Vass, 2000).

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<sup>132</sup> Of the Central and Eastern European countries, the Czech Republic has a similarly well-developed civil sector.

<sup>133</sup> Refer to statistics in the introduction regarding the increase in the number of NGOs.



The third sector is commonly viewed as the essential component of a modern democratic state to complement the market economy and the government, and so early in the post communist period legislation was introduced to consolidate the role of the civil sector in Hungary.<sup>134</sup> “The State would like to transfer all social tasks to the voluntary sector, the market and local government” says a critical sociologist (Vera Gáthy, quoted by Siegel and Yancey, 1992). With the state’s withdrawal from issues of welfare, a vacuum was created (Szalai, 2003) which the civil sector partially assumed responsibility for. With this withdrawal of the state from issues of welfare, there has been a reconceptualization of who is in need and how to satisfy those needs (Haney, 2002). Haney identifies three periods of Hungarian welfare regimes: the welfare society of 1948 to 1968; the maternalist welfare state of 1968 to 1985; and the liberal welfare state of 1985 onwards. In this most recent period, the needy were seen to be impoverished individuals (Haney, 2002:8-9). Like Szalai (2002), Haney notes that the nature of the state’s engagement in social life has direct implications for who is seen to be in need. In Hungary there has been an intermingling of poverty and ethnicity, helping to create a situation in which impoverished Roma are viewed as the ‘helplessly’ poor. While the evidence of initiative and enterprise presented in the previous chapter points to local-level entrepreneurship and questions the notion of the ‘helplessly’ poor, government policy is partially responsible for creating a situation in which those Roma that are poor are now blamed for their circumstances (Szalai, 2002). The nature of this situation is best encapsulated in the experiences of the local minority self-governments (Molnár and Schafft, 2003 and Szalai, 2003). The Local Minority Self-Government Act of 1993 was a move by the Government to include the Roma as active citizens in Hungarian public life and to encourage them to take responsibility for their own lives. Self-governance was at the heart of this act that simultaneously provided mechanisms for the Roma to represent themselves, while legitimizing a further withdrawal of the state from such matters. By encouraging civic association, the government is supporting Roma representation through civil society. While the local minority self-government legislation (1993) was supposed to support cultural activities (i.e.

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<sup>134</sup> Although Arato (1999) comments on the misfortune that “the constitution makers of 1994-1996 failed to produce a liberal democratic constitution that might have settled the relationship between parliamentary and direct democratic forms in a more definitive manner” (1999: 247).



language promotion and other cultural events), the local minority self-governments are finding themselves focusing on the communities' more urgent social problems (e.g. housing and unemployment) which they are incapable of dealing with satisfactorily having neither the resources nor authority (Molnár and Schafft, 2003:39). The experiences of local minority self-governments have led to the "conflation of local problems" thereby "reinforcing the perception that Roma impoverishment is a 'natural' condition" (Molnár and Schafft, 2003:27). The frustration that this inevitably leads to was apparent in Epervár, when László left the local council meeting in disgust and disappointment at the ineffectuality of the local minority self-government's President, i.e. at providing resolutions to László's and others problems (see Molnár and Schafft, 2003; Szalai, 2003; Koulis, 2001).

Aid from western donor agencies to the east is earmarked for projects that support the building of a liberal democracy and market economy. A flourishing civil society is seen as the key to achieving these goals, hence the donors' concern in supporting the development of a strong NGO network in the region. In this thesis, I am questioning the appropriateness of the rhetoric of civil society in the context of the Romany community for whom values of kinship allegiance indicate an aversion to extended family (*testvér*) associations. Using the experiences of a community development scheme as the vehicle, in this chapter I shall demonstrate that local values of relatedness and mistrust do indeed have implications for an NGO programme designed to foster grass-root level civil society. Civil society is part of the wider development discourse, imbued with different meanings according to situation and actors involved. In this chapter, I investigate how the values of civil society as perceived by NGOs (dialogue, trust, contract, partnership, association) have little relevance to the Romany community.

The discourse surrounding civil society and how it is received and understood differently by different actors is a subject that Reynolds (2003) has focused on by discussing the "different understandings of civil society expressed within and about" the Romanian civil sector (2003:2). While Hungary's state socialist regime was not as extreme as Romania's, and Hungary has now progressed further than Romania in terms of economic reform and human development, the two can be considered 'transition' countries importing ideologies of market economy,



democracy and civil society and hence both are engaged in a similar process. In the Romanian example, civil society – generally viewed in Hungary as the sphere that mediates between the state and the people and embodied by NGOs – is viewed suspiciously by the general public if it works too closely with either the state or with foreign funding bodies (Reynolds, 2003:Chapter 3). The former socialist regime is partly responsible for the current public opinion that views with suspicion all state interference, so NGOs that work with the mechanisms of the state are in danger of finding themselves mistrusted by the populace. Inevitably many have to enter this ‘trap.’ For this, and other reasons, “[c]ivil societies and NGOs in Romania have failed to be seen as legitimate alternatives to the state” (Reynolds, 2003:16). This feeling that state mechanisms and NGOs are equally at fault in terms of elitism and corruption is evident in Hungary too, and was expressed by László. A charity in Szilvaszék offers work to disabled people, so László had contacted it to apply for a position. He was turned down, he believed on account of his ethnicity, and therefore asked that a visiting *Magyar* friend of mine, from Budapest, contact the NGO for him. László believed that my friend, being *Magyar* and from a higher social status, would be able to secure a position for him. In his explanation of how such matters worked in Hungary, László described how there were always “two gates” (*két kapu*), a “big one and a small one”, and that my friend would be able to get László in through the small one while László would always be left waiting, knocking on the big one. As in Romania, two networks operate in the Hungarian civil sector: enabling ones and exclusionary ones (Reynolds, 2003). As this thesis has illustrated, there is a similarly ambiguous perception of networks in the Epervár Romany community. Allegiance to *testvér* (extended family) is both the fundamental rule of the community, and the source of accusations of being *zsivány* (crooked). This has pertinent implications for programmes intent on building civil society in such communities, as the Dignity Foundation hopes to do so. While László was eager to use his contact with my friend to manoeuvre himself into a new job, on another occasion László would have dismissed someone calling on their contacts in this way. This conflation of exclusionary and enabling networks is a constant theme in Epervár. László once told me that he intended to apply for funding from the Dignity Foundation with the intention that he would then fulfil the obligation to employ non-family. “My father would work here, as would my brothers Zsolt and István”, inadvertently he listed his close male relatives, so leaving himself as



vulnerable to accusations of *zsivány* as the people he was criticizing. The Dignity Foundation, as an NGO intent on encouraging civil society, finds itself in a similarly confused position: in one respect trust is viewed as a positive force to be nurtured, while 'exclusionary' local networks are viewed as the antithesis to civil society.

The Dignity Foundation is one of many Hungarian NGOs that was established to try to address the problem of the marginalization of Roma from all areas of Hungarian society. Whereas the state socialist government had worked towards the assimilation of the Romany population into mainstream Hungarian society, encouraging this through a variety of strategies that both raised standards of living and emphasized the values of the ideal proletarian worker, successive post-communist governments have focused on the multi-cultural nature of Hungarian society and concomitantly stressed the ethnic identity of Roma. Ethnic diversity is now officially celebrated, and NGOs are responding to this by engaging with different aspects of the Roma's situation in Hungary. Romany-targeted NGOs include: local or national cultural organizations or clubs, civil rights organizations, political and human rights organizations, and national umbrella organizations representing Romany political interests (Bársony and Dároczi, 1999, in Trehan, 2001:135). The Dignity Foundation, in contrast to 'top-down' intervention, is determined to work with the 'grass-roots', building relationships of trust and partnership with the project participants. As I explain below, the foundation's methods are designed to ensure that supported initiatives originate from, and are developed by, the project participants themselves. Community development projects are strategies to encourage 'bottom-up' participation, with non-Romany managed NGOs believing that such projects are necessary to overcome the inertia associated with Roma who are seen to live in a present-orientated condition (Pinnock, 1999:245). For the founder of the Dignity Foundation, who spoke of the Roma's inability to plan for the future, in doing so categorizing poor Roma with other impoverished people for whom day to day survival dominates lifestyle, the micro-enterprise schemes are a means of encouraging the Romany participants to plan for the future. While articulating such a scheme in such term may be patronizing to Roma, this is the basis for the interventions of many non-Romany NGOs (Pinnock, 1999:244).

The Dignity Foundation is an example of a Budapest-based, *Magyar*-staffed NGO. It was one of the first NGOs to address the economic situation of the Roma (previous assistance to Romany communities had been limited to cultural programmes and educational or social aid). The founder came from a dissident's background who, spurred by ideologies and methodologies of equality achievable through self-help initiatives, returned to Hungary as it liberalized to play a role in the emerging third sector. Other important staff members had been members of the Foundation for Supporting the Poor (*SZETA*) prior to 1989. This organization was illegal and occasionally persecuted. It worked towards raising funds to distribute to the poor, and as one of the country's earliest independent organizations it significantly contributed to the democratic opposition. The founding members of the Dignity Foundation were therefore fuelled by anti-state ideologies, determined to usher in a open democracy and an independent and effective civil sector.

The Dignity Foundation supports income-generating projects among poor Roma. The method of lending and grant-giving to support income-generating activities practiced by the Dignity Foundation is based on the micro-enterprise model first implemented in Bangladesh by the Grameen Bank. Following the Grameen Bank's success, the micro-credit model, as a means of improving the lives of poor and marginalized people, has been embraced with enthusiasm in a number of different contexts, ranging from the Pacific Island-based Vanuatu's Women's Development Scheme (VANWODS) to ACCION USA's work in U.S. inner city communities.<sup>135</sup> The basic rationale of the micro-credit scheme is that poor, marginalized people are unable to secure loans from formal financial institutions, such as banks, and are thus denied the opportunity to engage in entrepreneurial activities. By providing small loans to such individuals, NGOs hope to redress this imbalance. "The poor were previously thought unbankable by some, and micro-finance innovation proved this wrong" (Yaqub, 1998:108). In doing so, their aims are multi-purpose: to alleviate poverty, promote self-sufficiency and stimulate economic activity. Micro-credit schemes are most often run by NGOs which provide small, low-interest loans to marginalized segments of society so that the loan recipients can engage in small business ventures.

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<sup>135</sup> For information on VANWODS see the website: <http://peb.anu.edu.au>. For information on ACCION USA see the website: [www.accion.org](http://www.accion.org)



The Dignity Foundation has transferred the ideology and aims of the micro-credit model to specifically target the Hungarian Romany community. The Grameen Bank, like many micro-credit schemes, works exclusively with women. The Dignity Foundation however, has Romany clients of both sexes as its basis, believing that micro-credit can be a means of improving the lives of all *Cigánys*. The foundation aims to promote social and economic autonomy through the micro-credit model. By funding projects organized by Roma, or by a mixture of Roma and non-Roma, it is also hoped that cross-community relations will be fostered.<sup>136</sup> The local *Magyar* population will see that *Cigánys* are neither lazy, nor untrustworthy, but are in fact capable and eager to work, thereby breaking down a few of the myths that prevail in mainstream Hungarian society. The aim of the NGO, as well as providing work and an income for *Cigánys*, is therefore for improved relations between the two communities.

As explored in the previous chapter, the Roma of Epervár are no strangers to enterprise. The community thrives on a semi-invisible economy of entrepreneurial activity, and there is a healthy range of ventures throughout the year. This community development scheme is therefore not only feeding into an already established enterprise community, but is also engaging with a community with its own specific values. Positioned in the framework of a new emphasis on building civil society from the grassroots, it is useful to appreciate the ideological divides between the NGO and the project participants. The Dignity Foundation utilizes the micro-credit scheme model as a strategy to improve the living conditions of Romany clients and as a means of furthering integration at the local level between the *Magyar* and *Cigány* communities. The Dignity Foundation works with a particular philosophy that pre-supposes certain shared values between the NGO and the Romany communities that it works with.<sup>137</sup> In the following section, I shall introduce the Dignity Foundation's methodology and philosophy by

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<sup>136</sup> Thus avoiding one of the negative trends of NGO supporting Romany-targeted programmes and thus contributing to the further segregation of the Roma (Havas, Kertesi and Kemény, 1995).

<sup>137</sup> As I worked in one village only, this data, and my interpretation, is specific to the context of the Epervár *Cigány* community. The Dignity Foundation works with *Cigány* communities throughout Hungary, and their experiences with the NGO may well differ substantially. For a general summary of various micro-enterprise projects in Hungary see Csongor, Lukács and O'Higgins (2003) and Ringold, Orenstein and Wilkens (2003).



examining the foundation's income generation scheme. I will analyze the concept of 'trust' as embodied in the contract by the Dignity Foundation and the system of 'monitoring'. Using case studies and ethnographic material, I then begin to address how the Roma view of monitoring and the contract differs from the NGO's approach. The Epervár Roma's attitude to the NGO's community development scheme is supported and contextualized by the material discussed in the thesis so far. The NGO works with a particular philosophy that differs from the community's unique view of relatedness (allegiance to *testvér*) and of crooked (*zsivány*) behaviour being the source of distrust. By appreciating one Romany-targeted NGO's experiences in the field of civil society, it should be possible to more fully understand the position of the Roma in this new discourse.

## **2 The Dignity Foundation**

Understanding the particular philosophy and style of the Dignity Foundation, and the dynamics of the schemes that it implements are important to appreciate the juxtaposition of the foundation's ideology with the values of the community with which it is working. The foundation's experiences in Epervár add further depth to the issues presented so far in this thesis. What it is to be *Cigány* and the particular concepts of *testvér* and *zsivány* help to explain the repeated lack of impact that the Dignity Foundation has made in Epervár.

The Dignity Foundation's objective (from its 1998-99 Annual Report) is "to help the development of civil society in Hungary by supporting independent local initiatives". The foundation does this by employing different, and ever-evolving, strategies. The particular strategy that I focus on in this research is Dignity Foundation's ongoing poverty and ethnicity programme, described in the 1998-99 Annual Report thus: "The programme supports Roma and non-Roma registered non-governmental organizations with the aim of contributing to greater economic and social autonomy. In the program, priority is given to local initiatives that focus on the establishment of income-generating economic projects. By engaging in productive work to make a living, prejudices between the Roma and non-Roma are reduced, and there is greater opportunity for community cooperation. Most of the successful proposals concern agricultural projects, but the Foundation welcomes any ideas that contribute to the economic growth and strengthening of



local communities". This strategy of supporting local civic organizations is designed to both reinforce civil society while diminishing poverty.

A "typical Dignity Foundation application process" involves the following:

1. The Dignity Foundation receives an initial letter from an organization;
2. First assessment by a programme officer to see if the project fits Dignity Foundation's criteria;
3. A monitor visits the project and, if necessary, works with the participants to prepare a detailed proposal and budget;
4. The proposal and recommendation is put to the Dignity Foundation Board of Trustees;
5. Trustees decide to support the project;
6. Contract is signed and the first payment of funds is made;
7. Project repays the loan in instalments as stipulated in the contract;
8. Final project report, including a detailed financial report;
9. Follow up assessment.

(Dignity Foundation brochure, 1998)

In the beginning, the Dignity Foundation's financial support came from US private foundations and anonymous donors, with regional organizations, the Hungarian government and the European Commission contributing support later (Soros Foundation, Hungarian National Employment Fund and EU PHARE programme). According to material published in 1998, the Dignity Foundation is fortunate in this respect that it does not receive funding on a project basis, but has a budget endowment. In the period 1990 to 1997, the Dignity Foundation funded 301 projects with a budget of more than \$1.5 million. In the first half of this period, 62% of supported projects were agricultural and animal breeding activities, 24% were supporting manufacturing and service provision schemes, and the remainder were a variety of different activities. From 1994 to 1997, the emphasis changed with agricultural and animal breeding projects amounting to 73% of total supported projects. Over the years, the Dignity Foundation has changed and adapted its methods according to its successes. For instance, at the beginning the NGO only gave loans and insisted on 100% repayment. It became clear, however, that such a policy was unworkable as the Romany participants were simply unable to repay the loans. In response to this, grants were introduced,

allowing the Roma to invest a proportion of the money with no pressure of repayment. The founder of the Dignity Foundation strongly believes that the loan must always form the majority of money given to an association and is somewhat dismayed that, since his departure from the NGO, the amount of grants has increased. The founder, Bálint Antal, believes that the dominance of the loan is integral to the building of a partnership between the NGO and project participants, rather than a relationship of subservience, as he believes grant-giving implies. However, partially in line with this change in policy and partially due to robust monitoring techniques, there has been an improvement in repayment rates, rising from a 10% repayment rate in 1991 to nearly 80% in 1998.

## **2.1 Trust**

The concept of trust, as defined by the Dignity Foundation, is pivotal to the foundation's objectives. As an organization with long-term social goals, it wants to effectively address the root causes of the poverty and marginalization that Hungarian Roma face. It is not simply a neutral funding body that provides financial support in the form of interest-free loans and grants, rather it distributes money in a very specific manner, following its own terms and conditions. These rules emerged from and feed into the foundation's philosophy that believes foremost in fostering 'horizontal' relations based on mutual trust between itself, embodied in the contract and the monitoring process, and its clients. The foundation trusts in Romany individuals' ability to act. The following quotes illustrate the Dignity Foundation's concept of trust:

“The Dignity Foundation establishes ‘horizontal’ relationships with the projects it supports – relationships based on mutual trust. Trust is a particular issue when working with Roma who have experienced prejudice and mistrust much of their lives.” (Dignity Foundation brochure, 1998)

“It is worth pondering if it is really the financial aid voted by the Dignity Foundation's board that helps these people. It is not sure at all. If a Roma man who has been driven out of the labor market suddenly sees an opportunity, which would enable him to prove for himself and his environment that he is able to organize successful and economically useful activities, if he is given trust, which he has had a shortage of at home for years, that is when we can really help. This



help, however, cannot be efficient unless it is based on reliability and partnership, not on an impersonal, granter-grantee relationship.” (Director of Dignity Foundation’s foreword to the 2001 publication of the script of the 2000 conference celebrating ten years of the Foundation’s operation, 2001).

“The systematic reimbursement of loans by our partners holds up to any international comparison. It seems that our naive trust in and human respect for our partners has not been a bad investment” (Bálint Antal, 1995).

This concept of trust is of a particular kind associated with personal contact and responsibility. While other loan schemes insist on collateral from the lenders to help ensure the motivation to repay and work with the concept of trust in the anonymity of the capitalist contract, the Dignity Foundation works with an alternative model. Not requiring collateral is an important part of the Dignity Foundation’s version of trust, which is, for the founder of the Dignity Foundation, Bálint Antal, the “most positive element of the Dignity Foundation”.<sup>138</sup> Bálint Antal recalls a scene in South East Asia when a group of landless peasants, having walked for days to reach the NGO office, were handed their “seed” money with a simple handshake. It was the trusting attitude and personal quality of this interaction that inspired Bálint Antal to devise a similar model that could be applied to working with the Roma of Hungary. In designing the Dignity Foundation model, he therefore deliberately disregarded the idea that credible incentives in the form of suitable punishment for breaking the agreement is a central characteristic of trust (Dasgupta, 1988:50). Instead, Bálint Antal tends to lean towards the belief that people are intrinsically trustworthy, thus ignoring “the problem of trust”, believing instead that people are all “hopelessly moral, always saying what we said we would do in the circumstances in which we said we would do it” (Dasgupta, 1988:53). It is questionable how realistic Bálint Antal’s notion is. Dasgupta (1988) maintains that trust is only an issue because of the lack of consistency between individuals’ interests and broader moral values. In other words, trust is only an issue because people are not “hopelessly moral” in the way that Bálint Antal seems to imagine.

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<sup>138</sup> All quotes from Bálint Antal are from my interview with the founder of the Dignity Foundation.



The philosophy behind the Dignity Foundation comes from the personal dreams and ambitions of its founder, Bálint Antal. The major objective of the Dignity Foundation, according to Bálint Antal, was “in the noble sense of the word ‘political’, to develop Roma civil society and empower people to solve problems themselves”. The Hungarian Romany population was not autonomous, but dependent, and Bálint Antal wanted to change this. The means of achieving this “mission” of empowerment was through the financial strategy – micro-credit. While there was an explosion of Roma-led Romany organizations in the early 1990s, according to Bálint Antal, the Dignity Foundation was, and still is, unique in its strategy of encouraging Roma to make decisions for themselves at every stage – a “bottom-up approach”. The Dignity Foundation wanted to “provoke the Roma to look for alternative solutions to their own problems”. The philosophy that Bálint Antal believes in centres on self-motivation. The Dignity Foundation’s strategy is therefore focused on supporting and encouraging self-help.

Bálint Antal adapted the Dignity Foundation model from his first-hand experiences of a micro-credit programme in South East Asia. According to him, the marginalized landless peasants of South East Asia suffer from the same “motivational problems” as Hungarian Roma. He believes that marginal communities throughout the world all suffer from a lack of perspective: they lack the creative energy needed to allow them to change their situation. This lack of motivation is then transferred from generation to generation. Seeing commonalities in the situation of marginalized South East Asian communities and marginalized Hungarian Roma, Bálint Antal theorized that the model of self-help successfully used in South East Asia could be transferred to address the problems experienced by the Roma in Hungary.

Therefore, drawing on the South East Asian model, part of the methodology of the Dignity Foundation is to support only those projects that have stemmed from the ideas of the Roma themselves. By utilizing the “dialogue method”, Romany participants are encouraged to formulate questions to which they themselves will provide their own answers. The philosophy behind such a dialogue method is that the “objects of development” must not become “subjects”. The most important outcome of development initiatives is the psychological change that those involved experience. Through their involvement in development programmes, the



participants should realize that they themselves have the capabilities of solving their own problems. In light of this, Bálint Antal thinks that the main problem of many charities working in the area of development and aid work is that they end up treating the marginalized communities that they are working with as objects of their policy. Below, we examine the methods used by the Dignity Foundation in encouraging this horizontal dialogue.

Trust and the philosophy of partnership and mutual obligation are embodied in two particular aspects of the Dignity Foundation's lending procedure. The first, monitoring, was unique to the Dignity Foundation. "It was my innovation," Bálint Antal told me, though it has since "been copied". Monitoring involves Dignity Foundation staff, 'monitors', travelling to the sites of proposed and existing projects and talking to those involved in, or hoping to be involved in, a Dignity Foundation-supported enterprise. The monitors are "bridge people" (Bálint Antal interview) who neither manipulate nor instruct, but provoke. The other method employed by the Dignity Foundation to encourage a relationship based on mutual obligation is the contract. This is a more familiar embodiment of interdependent relationships. Contracts are used in many contexts as a legally binding document that clearly articulates the terms and conditions of the agreement reached between two parties. Both parties are able to refer to the contract to see what their obligations and what those of the other party are, and in times of discrepancy, the court of law can settle disputes, as the document is legally binding.

## **2.2 Monitoring**

Monitors are employed by the Dignity Foundation at several stages of a project's development: a monitor visits the proposed project site to make an initial feasibility assessment, then may visit later to provide additional guidance in the planning of the project, and finally, once the project is established, the monitor visits, at least once, to observe for him/herself how the organization is running. The original philosophy behind the monitoring scheme was "to facilitate people to think and find their own answers through a conversation with a 'monitor' who would pose carefully worded questions" (Dignity Foundation's 1997 Narrative Report).

However, the first wave of monitors employed by the Dignity Foundation did not understand the dialogue style of communication. The first monitors' profiles were people aged thirty to forty, who shared two characteristics: knowledge of Roma culture and knowledge of agriculture. These people, went to the project sites and *instructed* the participants. Bálint Antal had to sack these people, as they were failing to appreciate the central tenet of the Dignity Foundation's work. Instead, younger people, students of social sciences, who understood and accepted the role of being a "bridge" to "provoke", were employed. "These individuals have to be mature human beings in order to fulfil this role. The aid process, that of helping, is natural to human beings, but is a dependency process. Healing people in the natural sense of the word reproduces dependency. So, the monitors need to understand that it is not aid work that they are doing, but that they are part of a partnership process", Bálint Antal expounded in the interview.

The Dignity Foundation's 1997 Narrative Report explains that modifications have been made to this style of monitoring. It became clear that the rather non-involved style of monitoring had to be adjusted in light of the fact that some people needed additional guidance and extra support. Despite adjustments to the role of monitors, the philosophy behind monitoring continues to be that monitors should not interfere with the project by adding either unnecessary criticism or advice. The monitors' main role is still that of facilitator. The intention of the Dignity Foundation is "to ensure that the Dignity Foundation does not operate as a paternalistic donor" (Dignity Foundation brochure, 1998). Monitoring and the contract are two ways of helping to ensure this. The monitor is simply a channel through which the participants can realize their dreams, which, crucially, the participants themselves must articulate and initiate themselves.

Dignity Foundation monitors are invariably *Magyar* males. A Romany male confided in me that he had left his position as monitor after just a week because of the low pay. The director of the Dignity Foundation, Zsuzsanna Kovács, offered alternative explanations for the absence of Romany monitors. She explained that the NGO's experience with *Cigány* monitors was that they always felt compelled to take sides: they either strongly sided with the Romany participants or with the Dignity Foundation. One former Romany monitor avoided the whole issue of with whom to side by concentrating on administrative tasks. Moreover, Romany



monitors find it difficult when they are treated suspiciously by members of their “own community”. As Zsuzsanna Kovács acknowledged, to be a Rom does not mean that you are accepted and integrated into every *Cigány* community in Hungary as there are so many different Romany communities. She illustrated with an example of a Beash Romany monitor going to visit a Vlach Romany project. The animosity between these two Romany groups, who speak different languages and have different value systems, would mean that such a visit would cause tensions. As for the lack of female monitors, this was explained by the fact that the project leaders are normally male and it is perceived that male monitors can more easily establish relations with these Romany men.

One of the characteristic traits necessary for monitors, as we saw above, is that, despite their relative youth (mid to late twenties), they must understand that their role is to provoke, rather than to aid. Other personal qualities that present monitors identified as being prerequisites for their work were empathy (*empatikus*), an interested and inquiring mind (*érdeklődő*) and frankness and honesty (*egyenesség*). It is very important that the monitors are able to communicate in plain language with the participants (“*tudnak egyszerűen beszélni*”). These skills and attributes facilitate dialogue between the monitors and the *Cigány* project participants.

Monitors are the embodiment of the Dignity Foundation as, for the *Cigány* clients, they are the face of the Dignity Foundation. It is through Dignity Foundation monitors and only through them that clients have any personal contact with the Foundation. Correspondence may be signed by the Dignity Foundation Director or Programme Co-ordinator, but it is the monitor who makes the trips out to localities, meets the organization leader, its members and often the local Mayor. On these visits, the monitor acts as the representative of the Dignity Foundation. The monitor, in this way, plays a pivotal role in the organization as it is through the monitor that the Dignity Foundation’s values, those of trust and cooperation, are articulated. The monitor is a trained professional who represents the Dignity Foundation beyond the Budapest offices. By monitors travelling to the site and talking directly to the people involved, the Dignity Foundation is helping to ensure that only projects that are realistic enough and optimal will be supported. However, and perhaps more importantly, the Dignity Foundation is also trying to



present itself as a foundation that recognizes and respects personal, informal contact as much as the written contract. Through its use of monitors the foundation is making an effort to show that it believes in the power and capabilities of Roma as individuals. This strategy is an attempt to consider and incorporate how the Roma, as a community that is treated with a great deal of hostility and distrust, feel. The monitor bridges the gap between the potentially impersonal and bureaucratic foundation and its clients. The monitor strategy is an important part of the Dignity Foundation's philosophy, and on his/her visit, the monitor is personally embodying this aspect of the foundation's philosophy.

Monitors are not just valued for their work with the scheme participants, but are also important for their role in encouraging a sense of responsibility in the donor. Through the monitoring system, the foundation is able to follow the progress of projects. The normal and rather inadequate model for participant-donor interaction is for the donor to receive a written progress report in return for its financial investment. The close personal interaction between the monitors, participants and donor is an attempt by the Dignity Foundation to "step outside the bureaucratic framework" (Bálint Antal). Zsuzsanna Kovács said that the monitoring scheme provided an important means for the Dignity Foundation to learn about the needs of the Roma. "The needs of the Roma should be a part of the Dignity Foundation employees' lives" (Zsuzsanna Kovács). This monitoring strategy is an example of an attempt to create (if only somewhat symbolically) what Williams labels "thick trust" (Williams, 1988:8). Thick trust exists between people who know each other intimately, and this is the best guarantee of cooperation. Monitors are attempting to establish a degree of thick trust in their relationship with scheme participants.

Monitors' visits to project sites were emotionally and professionally demanding for the individual monitors involved.<sup>139</sup> Individual monitors, visiting a wide range of projects, varying in regard to the quality of the project proposals (quality of leadership, feasibility, sustainability) and the living conditions of the Roma, had extremely different experiences on each visit. The personal style of individual monitors also plays a role in the atmosphere and tone of visits. One particular trip was to assess the feasibility of a brick-making project. On this visit, the direct,

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<sup>139</sup> On a number of occasions, I accompanied several monitors on their visits to proposed project sites and to established Dignity Foundation-supported projects, and these were illuminating experiences.



straight-talking monitor was treated as a special guest by the Romany leader of the proposed project. The day began with a formal discussion of the project, a project that seemed ill-conceived and lacked basic qualities to ensure success. The enthusiasm of the proposers was palpable, but using two books on how to make bricks as evidence of competence hardly inspired confidence in the enterprise. Outside the meeting room, we met the would-be participants. They were mainly young Roma, with young children, and all were unemployed. The proposal involved them making bricks, which they could use to build themselves houses and sell on the market. After this general, informal meeting, we were taken to the pub by the Romany leader for a drink, before driving to the *Cigány* settlement to see the (inadequate) living conditions of the settlement dwellers. The day was rounded off by drinks at the Romany leader's comparatively luxurious house. It was an emotionally exhausting day for the monitor. As it was explained to me after, the monitor perceived his role as "not interfering" but simply asking "leading questions". The discrepancy and problem with this approach raised itself at this brick making project meeting. It seemed that the Roma knew that they could secure funds as long as they said and did what the NGO wanted, but that the NGO, while fishing for the 'correct' answer, would not say exactly what they wanted. The Roma were trying to 'play the game' but knew neither the rules nor the best strategy.

On this occasion, despite the flimsy quality of the proposal and the appalling living conditions of a group of Roma, the monitor received deferential treatment, with alcohol uncorked and cooked foods offered. On other occasions, a more business-like tone was struck, with applicants presenting their proposals in a more austere environment. A soft drink would be the only refreshment offered, and the meeting, held in the house of the leader, would be briefer and more business-like in tone. However, in all cases it is clear that the monitor has the power in his/her hands to influence the lives of the leader and members of the *Cigány* organization. Once, a monitor was enthusiastically and proudly shown videos of the local *Cigány* Balls; another time, we were shown the work done so far in constructing rabbit hutches for a rabbit-breeding business proposal. On every occasion, the leader of the proposed project and, for that particular day, the monitor's hosts are determined to persuade the monitor that the Dignity Foundation should support their proposal. A monitor told me that he is usually treated well (*kedvesen*) by the



people he visits. People normally offer him food and drink, although the poorest are unable to do this. He is treated like a guest, and particularly so on the first visit. The *Cigány* participants and the monitors may become good acquaintances (*jó ismerős*), but never friends. The monitor makes this distinction, as 'friend' implies too strong a relationship, when ultimately the project participants are motivated by desire for the Dignity Foundation's money.

As a monitor explained, there are advantages to the socializing aspect of these visits. In fact, they provide an opportunity for the monitor to learn more about the relationships and personalities involved in the proposed project. One monitor spoke of engaging locals in conversation, posing as an interested external observer, and thereby finding out about aspects of the business proposal from local, knowledgeable and neutral informants. While there is a 'social etiquette' to the monitor visits, which can be uncomfortable in tone, these interactions with the potential project participants serve a purpose in gaining a deeper understanding of the situation.

In all cases, when the monitor is visiting to assess a project's potential, the monitors' visits were necessarily somewhat forced and artificial due to the restrictions of time and the power relationship at play. While more obvious on some visits than others, the monitor held in his or her power the ability to support or refuse a project. The monitors and the director of the foundation are aware that the side of community life that they see is far removed from daily settlement life, and they have expressed the desire to learn more about settlement life. Sitting in a bar after the visit to the proposed brick-making project site, the monitor referred to that day's visit as an example of the reason for his drinking, "This is why I drink". He had been unimpressed with the proposal, as it had appeared to be little more than a vehicle for a local *Cigány* entrepreneur and a local *Magyar* entrepreneur to improve business for themselves in the guise of building proper housing for a group of Roma living in shockingly inadequate constructions. Discarded wood and metal and even sheets of newspaper were arranged to try and provide shelter from the elements, as their small mud house constructions were collapsing. There was an obvious need for housing improvements, but this project could not legitimately be supported by the Dignity Foundation as it was not a business strategy that would bring such improvements. Exposure to such



situations brought an emotional strain on the monitor. However, the monitors rarely have contact with the most impoverished people because those Roma that lead the projects are normally the richer ones with the ability, skills and knowledge to apply to the Dignity Foundation.

Monitors also have to deal with the stress of projects hitting difficulties.<sup>140</sup> Zsuzsanna Kovács said that since the Dignity Foundation's first experiences, the monitors have become "sceptical". They still get hurt when project participants fail to pay loans as promised, but they have learnt not to take it personally. The personal involvement of monitors in the projects, and the notion that they could 'get hurt' at all, lies in the special feature of the Dignity Foundation that loans rely heavily on a concept of trust. The system of monitoring means that, to a degree, the monitors enter into a personal deal with the participants. So, when a loan is not repaid, the monitors can feel a slight on their person. A monitor compared the Dignity Foundation lending system as giving money to a friend. The friend is indebted to pay the money back for personal reasons – and this situation is replicated by the Dignity Foundation with its projects participants. If the trust is broken, the monitor feels bad (*kellemetlen*) and it is difficult to then rebuild that trust. And this, the monitor said, is a normal response to a friend lying to you. This response and conceptualization of trust, friendship and lending money is extremely interesting considering the form that these concepts take in the Epervár Romany community. This is a point that I will turn to later.

### **2.3 The Contract**

The contract is a necessary part of the agreement between the Dignity Foundation monitors and the foundation – it is legally binding and stipulates all the responsibilities and obligations of the foundation and the organization participants. The terms and conditions are agreed on beforehand by the organization leader and the Dignity Foundation. There are terms that the Dignity Foundation insists upon including, e.g. all invoices must be sent to the Dignity Foundation within ten days of the date of transaction, while, for instance, the structuring of the loan repayment is flexible and open to negotiation as that aspect of the contract is tailored to individual situations. The role and responsibility of

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<sup>140</sup> The Dignity Foundation staff deal with such stresses through talking together in the office. An important feature of the Dignity Foundation is the warm, hospitable and supportive atmosphere in their Budapest offices.



the organization leader, the repayment of the loan schedule, what the money is to be used for, the degree of flexibility in how the money is spent, the fact that invoices must be sent to the Dignity Foundation and (as we shall examine more closely below) the public reading of the contract at a gathering of all the organization membership are all stipulated in the contract. While the Dignity Foundation places a great deal of emphasis on the function of trust in its agreements, the contract, as a monitor said, is more important in guaranteeing that the loan is repaid.

#### The 'contract-within-a-contract'

As referred to above, one of the compulsory stages in the Dignity Foundation's micro-credit scheme (as stipulated in the contract) is that the contract must be read out in the presence of all the membership. This is, according to the Dignity Foundation, a method adopted to help ensure repayment (Dignity Foundation 2002 website). While it is only the project leader who signs the contract and accepts responsibility for guaranteeing that the stipulations therein are adhered to, the contract is in some sense signed by the larger community – the members of the organization. The Dignity Foundation has imposed rules concerning the signing of the contract in an effort to try and guarantee the acceptance and smooth running of the business in the local community. The Dignity Foundation contract must be read out at a general meeting attended by all members of the organization and the two copies of the contract signed in their presence. These people must then sign to say that they attended the meeting – in which case they will have heard the contract being read out and witnessed its signing – and all these documents must then be sent to the Dignity Foundation in order for the first instalment to be issued. This guarantees, among other things, that all members are aware of the contract details and removes total influence and power from the hands of the individual project leader. For the Dignity Foundation, this process is an attempt to avoid potential conflict and encourage cooperation at the local level (Dignity Foundation 2002 website). The public reading is an attempt to enable the Romany participants to control their leaders – it supplies them with the necessary information and lets them know that they are in a position to influence events. By not including the monitor in this stage of the process, the aim is to imbue participants with a sense of ownership. The monitor is partially removed from the process, and the participants themselves take on the 'policing' responsibility.



“Information is the basis of democracy” says Bálint Antal, and this process is supposed to make it clear to everyone that they each have a role to play in the implementation of the project.

However, the NGO has noticed that this strategy often has a negative effect on the project’s development. Bálint Antal commented that he was “not very happy about this technique”, and Zsuzsanna Kovács now considers this contract-reading as being “counter-productive”. She said that it is “totally upsetting” that people pretend to understand: the participants attend the meeting, as required, without a real understanding of what is being said or why. Zsuzsanna Kovács now believes that these meetings are attended in the spirit of communism as people are used to being called to public meetings in the cooperatives. It is only later, once everyone has returned home, that the participants consider what has been said and become jealous that the organization leader has received money while they have none.

It has become clear to the Dignity Foundation that members of the organization cannot exercise control. Rather, it is only those members from the same socio-economic strata as the leader who can influence the situation, those less powerful and less knowledgeable individuals who make up the body of the membership are powerless.

### **3 Community Development on the Ground**

We have had a brief overview of the Dignity Foundation’s community development programme and the inherent values of trust and cooperation on which the micro-enterprise strategy is based.

There is, as we will see, a long and rather fragile relationship between the Dignity Foundation and members of the *Epervár Cigány* community. The pallet factory project that was officially in operation when I started my fieldwork in November 2000 was the most recent of a series of such arrangements between Romany entrepreneurs and funding organizations. The evidence and information presented here is an amalgamation of fieldwork experiences, interviews with former and present *Epervár* Dignity Foundation project participants, interviews with former and present Dignity Foundation staff and information gathered from personal

correspondence between the Dignity Foundation and Epervár project participants. Through the analysis of this evidence, we shall investigate past associations between the Dignity Foundation and Epervár Romany organizations and try to understand the complex relationship between the two. Much of this analysis will focus on the concept of trust as articulated by the Dignity Foundation through the contract and monitoring, compared with the very different notion of trust and cooperation that the Epervár Roma work with. The past problems that the Dignity Foundation has experienced with Epervár projects has discouraged further investment by the Dignity Foundation into certain projects proposed by Epervár Roma. For instance, the monitor visiting a proposed cane project in Epervár in the summer of 2000 said that it was a good project proposal and that he liked the leader, but that it would not be supported as the Dignity Foundation had had bad experiences with such cane-based enterprises.<sup>141</sup>

### **3.1 Pallet Factory Case Study**

I shall now present an overview of what was a Dignity Foundation ‘success’ story when I started my fieldwork. While writing this research and communicating sporadically with the Dignity Foundation during this period, the Dignity Foundation came to the opinion that the pallet factory was not as successful as they had previously estimated. Together with case studies presented later, this story will help us understand the interplays and attitudes of the Epervár Roma towards such schemes.

The pallet factory project proposal involved the initial training of fifteen men in the use of circular saws, and then provided, according to varying reports, employment for between ten and fifteen of these men. 70% of these employees are Roma and all receive 40,000 HUF a month. The official leader of the project has made claims to be *Magyar*.<sup>142</sup> Although she is very involved in and knowledgeable about the project, it is her Romany husband who is treated and

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<sup>141</sup> The pallet factory leader asked me if this project proposal had been supported. On hearing that it had been unsuccessful, she concluded that it was because there was no aspect of training in it: something they believed the Dignity Foundation valued in proposals.

<sup>142</sup> She is trained as a nurse and claims that, following her marriage to her *Cigány* husband, she has been unable to secure employment – she has been subjected to anti-*Cigány* discrimination. The project manager of a state-funded Romany scheme said of such people, who cannot be definitely identified as Romany or not, that they have “two bows (*két vonó*) inside them”.



referred to as the leader (*főnök*) by the employees and by villagers. He is the practical leader of the factory.<sup>143</sup>

The project started in 1998 when the Roma Association, led by the husband and wife team, took over a sawmill when the proprietors moved to the nearby city of Debrecen. The Association took over the premises, machinery and market. Funding was secured from three sources: the National Employment Public Foundation provided 13 million HUF; the Soros Foundation 280,000 HUF; and the Dignity Foundation 2,000,000 HUF.

The Dignity Foundation began supporting the pallet factory business in 2000, firstly with a Roma training programme (March 2000) and then with the awarding of a grant and loan (the 'pallet factory job creation programme' contract was signed 16<sup>th</sup> October, 2000). The factory project received a grant of 1,000,000 HUF for the buying of factory equipment and materials and an interest-free loan of 1,000,000 HUF for other costs, including materials, over-heads and wages to enable the business to become sustainable. The loan was to be repaid in monthly instalments of 83,000 HUF over the course of twelve months.

The factory processes poplar and pine, making the raw wood into two types of pallets: 'CTN' and 'B'. The 'CTN' type is larger and sells for 640 HUF (+VAT) while the narrower 'B' type pallet sells for 500 HUF (+VAT). *Magyars* pick up the pallets by truck and deliver and export them to Italy, where other goods are loaded onto them. The price of the pallets is included in the purchase price of the goods, and the pallets, now carrying produce, are then returned to Hungary along the same route. According to the programme leaders, they deliver 600-700 pallets a week, with monthly sales reaching 2-2.5 million HUF.

These are the facts as garnered from interviews with the project leaders and employees (*Magyar* and Roma) and reports presented by the association for the Dignity Foundation. There are photographs displayed in the factory back room showing a huge lorry, piled high with pallets, leaving the site. However, personal observations left it difficult for me to substantiate the working practices at the factory, as during my stay in the village, I only once saw the pallet factory in

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<sup>143</sup> Hence, from this point forth, I refer to the 'project leaders'.



operation and at that time there was only one Romany employee other than the leader's two sons. This man was later made redundant, apparently because the factory was on a break, but the sons and several *Magyars* continued to work in the factory grounds on the greenhouse construction.<sup>144</sup> With the loans being paid back regularly, and all evidence on monitor's visits pointing to an efficient and productive factory, at this time, the pallet factory was viewed by the Dignity Foundation as a success story.

However, most people in the settlement thought that the pallet factory was a scam. The leaders had received money to employ local Roma but were instead only employing a select few people: their "*család*" (close family), *testvér* (extended family) or *Magyars*. The leaders were therefore dismissed as "*zsivány*" and most members of the community distanced itself from them. Rumours spread about their ill-gotten wealth, but mostly little attention was paid to the factory and the people who worked there. The pallet factory leaders' close family definitely appeared to be enjoying a more prosperous lifestyle. The husband and wife were well-dressed and adorned in gold jewellery. They owned a western model estate car, were building a large, multi-storied house in the main body of the village and were rumoured to have bought a third property in Szilvaszék. A portion of the pallet factory had been converted into living quarters for the leaders' youngest son and his pregnant wife as the nineteen-year-old son was employed as a security guard to watch over the greenhouse (built in the grounds of the pallet factory), while his wife was employed as cleaner of the factory. I queried this cleaning job, having seen the factory in production on only one occasion and knowing that his wife was by that stage heavily pregnant. "That's what's good about being the leader's son", the young man acknowledged with a smile.

The monitors eventually became suspicious about the work practices of the factory, although Zsuzsanna Kovács admits that the Dignity Foundation was "slow" in this realization. The female leader had made a positive impression on the foundation for a long time, and so it took staff a while to become disillusioned with her. In the pallet factory, Zsuzsanna Kovács now believes that no one had

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<sup>144</sup> One man, Tamás, explained that he was not eligible to work at the factory as, despite having no waged labour, he was not registered as unemployed (a requirement). András used the excuse often cited by the settlement inhabitants as a reason for not working at a certain place: the pay was too low and so it would be beneath his dignity to work there. "Only stupid, drunk *Magyars* are willing to work there", explained another Romany man.



been sincere in their relationships, and ultimately the Dignity Foundation was cheated. It could be concluded that the pallet factory leaders had played the game skilfully.

The pallet factory was built on a site far from the settlement. The grounds were on a road that led only to cultivated fields. The settlement *Cigánys* had no reason to go, and never went down to the site. With no Roma from the settlement employed in the factory or greenhouse (the leaders' close family lived on the edge of the settlement – one of the first houses of the settlement – but on a small, unsurfaced road that was rarely used), it is with little hesitation that I write that this project failed to make an impact on daily community life. The overwhelmingly negative perceptions of the Dignity Foundation within the settlement are partially formed by the perceptions of this project, simply consolidating the community's past experiences of these schemes, as we shall see below.

### **3.2 Árpád and the Dignity Foundation: a case study**

The following case study is constructed from correspondence between the Dignity Foundation and Árpád (at the time the President of the Epervár minority self-government who became leader of a Dignity Foundation supported project), interviews with the Dignity Foundation staff and interviews with Árpád. The progression of Árpád's project, the difficulties he and the Dignity Foundation encounter and their responses to these problems, are indicative of a gulf between their respective aims and point to different attitudes towards the contract, trust and monitors.

In January 1993, Árpád writes a preliminary letter, acting on information received from the leader of the Foundation for Hungarian National and Ethnic Minorities, *A Magyarországi Nemzeti és Etnikai Kisebbségekért Alapítvány*, that the Dignity Foundation gives loans to registered organizations such as their own. While the Epervár minority self-government had registered on 26<sup>th</sup> August, 1992, in the Debrecen Court of Registration, they were not entitled to government funding until the end of the year. Árpád therefore requests for initial capital with which to begin job creation programmes before the spring sowing season. He refers to agricultural and pig breeding projects for which they need to rent land and buy animals.

The programme coordinator's reply is cheery and encouraging. While Árpád's request for one to one-and-a-half million HUF is turned down on the grounds that the foundation never gives that much to individual projects, a brochure outlining the nature of projects supported and the application procedure is sent to Árpád.

After initial negotiations, a contract is agreed and signed on 28<sup>th</sup> March, 1993 by Árpád and the director of the Dignity Foundation. The contract concerns two projects: the production of sugar beet and pig breeding. The grant of 300,000 HUF is to be used exclusively for the renting of land and sugar beet production, while the 500,000 HUF interest-free loan is to be spent solely on the pig breeding enterprise, to buy animals and feed. At some stage, it is also agreed that Árpád will also manage a corn growing project (referred to in a monitor's report). The terms and conditions of the loan are stipulated, e.g. the organization must keep the entire unused sum in its bank account and comply with the auditing regulations. All expenses must be accounted for through invoices sent to the Dignity Foundation within ten days of use. Dates for the regular repayment of the loan in instalments are specified: 100,000 HUF by 30<sup>th</sup> July, 1993; 150,000 HUF by 30<sup>th</sup> October, 1993; 150,000 HUF by 30<sup>th</sup> January, 1994; and 100,000 HUF by 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1994.

By signing the contract, Árpád accepts full responsibility for the projects. Any hindrances that the project experiences must be explained in writing to the Dignity Foundation without delay, and in June and January Árpád must present financial reports in line with the project's objectives. Árpád's responsibilities, as leader of the organization, are clearly stated in this document and the director of the Dignity Foundation signs the contract under the encouraging message, "We wish you all the best in your noble activities".

The general meeting, at which the contract was read out, was attended by all the organization members who signed an attendance sheet (as stipulated in the contract). Of these sixty-four individuals, an impressive nine surnames are on the list. Couples and their children have signed below each other – one can imagine the paper being passed from one family (*család*) member to another as each signed their signature, or passed from household to household.



Problems with the projects, however, begin before the first instalment is due to be paid back, and this first set-back sets the tone for future relations between the Dignity Foundation and Árpád's organization. In June 1993, before the first instalment is due to be paid back, Árpád requests that the loan repayment is restructured as he is experiencing problems with the corn and chemicals. His request to delay repaying the first instalment is agreed to by the Dignity Foundation. Further letters from Árpád refer to a new plan to rent cane land from the Mayor so that members of the organization can collect and bundle the cane for sale. As explored elsewhere in the thesis, this is a common, local, profitable, seasonal activity.

Following letters from Árpád requesting further loan repayment changes, in December 1993, the programme coordinator writes a less congenial letter to Árpád reminding him that 250,000 HUF is now due and letting him know that there will be no possibility of further restructuring. The letter states that representatives of the Dignity Foundation are planning to travel to Epervár in January in order to meet the membership, as there have been significant changes to the original plan as outlined in the contract. The programme coordinator requests that Árpád send details of when the next general meeting will take place. The programme coordinator writes that on the same trip, the Dignity Foundation representatives intend to meet the Mayor of Epervár too.

In fact, Árpád and the organization never met with members of the Dignity Foundation staff in January, as requested. Instead, it is by a letter, dated 10<sup>th</sup> February, 1994, accompanied by numerous relevant documents, that Árpád lets the Dignity Foundation know about the progress of his projects.

Rather than investing in the cultivation of sugar beet, a cane project was embarked upon by the organization. Land was leased from the Mayor for 67,000 HUF. According to Árpád, the land contains about 10,000 bunches of cane with a sale price of 250,000 to 300,000 HUF. However, the land flooded and failed to freeze (due to the mild weather), so, apart from one day's work, it has been impossible for the cane to be collected. Before taking alternative action, Árpád is waiting a

month in the hope that the temperature will drop to the required -15 °C for the water to freeze sufficiently to hold the workers up.

The contingency plan, in case the water fails to freeze, is for men from a nearby town to travel in with their machine, which is able to cut and bundle cane in water, and to do the job for the organization. The men working the machine charge 13-15 HUF per bundle and Árpád estimates an export market price of 160-180 HUF per bundle, therefore the organization would still receive a sufficient profit from every bundle. As the cane, at the time of this communication, is still not collected, Árpád writes that he is therefore unable to pay the members a premium as stated in the contract between the minority self-government and the casual workers. However, once the cane is collected (either by machine or by hand), there will be a general meeting to which the Mayor will also be invited and at which the proceeds will be divided as agreed.

Two equally unforeseeable problems had hit the corn growing project. The first was that a drought had damaged corn growth. The county Ministry of Agriculture office subsequently compensated the organization for the damage caused by this drought. As compensation for the 26 hectares, 3,000 square metres of affected land, it was calculated that the organization was entitled to receive 92,050 HUF (2,395 kg/ha: 3,500 HUF/ha). Árpád estimates that there was a 60% loss of production.

The second problem to hit the corn growing project was theft. On 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 1993, 70,000 HUF worth of corn (50-60 '*mázsa*', or 5,000 to 6,000 kilos) was stolen from the organization. The police write that from the evidence, they were unable to identify who the suspect may be. Similarly, attempts to find the stolen corn were futile. The investigation yielded no results, and with no possibility of new findings it was closed. Árpád encloses the police reports in his correspondence, stating that he is unclear about his responsibility in such a situation. The stress of the situation, Árpád writes, has adversely affected him, "[t]he theft and the drought means that I now take sleeping pills" (correspondence from Árpád to the Dignity Foundation, 10<sup>th</sup> February, 1994). The Dignity Foundation was suspicious that this theft might in fact have been set-up, but despite a monitor visiting the site, were unable to substantiate their concerns.



However, despite these problems with the corn enterprise, Árpád's organization was still able to organize the grinding down of a portion of the corn as planned. Non-members of the organization were paid 50,000 HUF to do this job. Árpád estimates that the ground corn is worth 120,000 HUF. In addition to this 120,000 HUF and the 92,050 HUF drought compensation, the assets of the organization, according to Árpád, are two fat pigs and five smaller ones, the value of which, in May, should be 200,000 HUF. The organization's assets therefore total 532,050 HUF. Of this, Árpád plans to spend 32,000 HUF on feed for the animals, and 500,000 HUF is owed to the Dignity Foundation.

This financial situation, aggravated by extreme weather conditions and the theft, is Árpád's explanation for being unable to pay the members of his organization. He writes that instead, he was forced to pay only day wages to those who had worked. It is clear from this letter that there is disruption and dissatisfaction within the organization as he encloses five letters from members of the organization that he is excluding. Árpád attempts to reassure the Dignity Foundation about these dismissals by countering them with the news that fifteen others have expressed an interest in joining his organization. Árpád concludes this letter by writing of having "grown fond of this land" and hopes that "we do not have either a drought nor a theft this year" (personal correspondence from Árpád to the Dignity Foundation, 10<sup>th</sup> February, 1994).

A couple of months later, there are further signs of there being dissatisfaction within the organization. A member of the organization telephoned the Dignity Foundation offices to complain that Árpád was abusing funds. The Dignity Foundation reply is supportive of Árpád. Letters are sent to both Árpád and the complainant, stating that the foundation has found no cases of financial abuse.

It is apparent that there were discrepancies within the village about the exact nature of the loan and grant and how it was being used. This was not only the case within the organization (c.f. the above phone call of complaint and members asking to be dismissed), but is implied by Árpád's correspondence with the Dignity Foundation asking for a letter to prove that he is unemployed. He wants the letter to prove to the Epervár Mayor's office that while the minority self-

government received funding, Árpád himself received no wages from the Dignity Foundation and is therefore entitled to unemployment benefit. The Dignity Foundation complies and writes such a letter to the Mayor's office. The Epervár Mayor's office, a *Magyar* institution that had at this time only recently begun dealing with the new minority self-government authority, had questioned Árpád's application to receive unemployment benefit.

Further dissatisfaction within the organization becomes clear when in March 1994, six members of the organization write letters to the Dignity Foundation expressing their desire to leave Árpád's organization in order to set up their own association. They request that their contract with the Dignity Foundation be terminated. However, these letters were only received by the Dignity Foundation nine months later. Árpád had failed to send them earlier. In December 1994, once the letters have arrived at the Dignity Foundation's Budapest offices, the programme coordinator writes a serious letter in which the Dignity Foundation's dissatisfaction with Árpád having failed to send the letters of resignation earlier is made clear. In addition, the Dignity Foundation's earlier request to attend the January 1994 general meeting and to meet the Mayor (referring to correspondence dated December 1993) was not complied with. Of the loan, 35,000 HUF has been repaid, but the 465,000 HUF (which had been promised for the end of that year) remains unaccounted for. The Dignity Foundation requests that information detailing who is a member of the organization (who left, when and why), who works for the organization and how much money ought to be sent to them. Itemized accounts on how the May 1994 transfer of 200,000 HUF has been spent are also requested. The Dignity Foundation writes that only once this information has been received, will they decide how to continue.

In response, Árpád defends and explains the situation in Epervár. He writes that a Dignity Foundation monitor had visited the site and spoken to the Mayor in March 1993. The only reason the monitor had been unable to attend a general meeting of the organization at that time was because they were afraid of being sued. "I don't want to list the things the others in the organization were dissatisfied with as you know them. The accusations have no grounds. The Vice-President and the Secretary have convinced the members that these false accusations are true" (personal correspondence from Árpád to the Dignity Foundation, 1<sup>st</sup> October,



1994). Árpád instead accuses these two members of abuse of funds, claiming that he had paid them each 20,000 HUF for hoeing work that they subsequently did not do. Both failed to pay back the money even though they did not do any work.

Some people requested that they be allowed to leave the organization, but Árpád defends himself by writing that they did not leave in anger but that they left to set up their own organization. As for the six that officially wanted to resign, Árpád had deemed it not important enough to inform the Dignity Foundation. In the March 1994 minority self-government election, two of the people who had been sacked on request, stood as candidates. They failed to be elected however as the rest of Árpád's organization agreed not to vote for them, "But because the vote is secret, they won't be angry" (personal correspondence from Árpád to the Dignity Foundation, 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1994). Otherwise, Árpád believes that there is harmony and agreement within the organization. Seeking to reassure them in Budapest he telling says, "the vast majority of membership agrees with me because 80% are relatives [*rokon*]" (personal correspondence from Árpád to the Dignity Foundation, 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1994). The five former members of the self-minority government will therefore retain their positions, and the President will be elected from them: "I feel I shall continue to be that President" (personal correspondence from Árpád to the Dignity Foundation, 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1994).

Both monitors on their visits (March, 1992 and July, 1994) were shown the situations that Árpád claimed made it impossible for him to organize the work: the water-logged cane land, the corn fields affected by drought and the land from where corn was stolen. In this letter, he readily admits that he has experienced problems paying back the loans, but impresses upon the programme coordinator that the monitors saw the situations for themselves.

Enclosed with this letter are invoices: cash flow invoices and details of members' wages. The Dignity Foundation's request for the details of the transfer of the 200,000 HUF is neatly avoided however. Despite referring to their request, Árpád provides no accounts nor explanation. Instead he questions the programme coordinator's motivations for requesting this information, "I feel that these letters show a lack of trust" (personal correspondence from Árpád to the Dignity Foundation, 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1994). In his letter to the programme coordinator, he signs

off, “Dear Gábor Vida! I think that this complies with your request. I will send another letter when I explain why I could not send back the money, tell you my present financial situation and apply for another loan” (personal correspondence from Árpád to the Dignity Foundation, 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1994), thereby avoiding the issue of the 200,000 HUF.

As promised in the correspondence referred to above, Árpád does indeed submit a further request for a loan (12<sup>th</sup> January, 1995). Hearing no positive response, despite the Board meeting having taken place in December, Árpád writes to the Dignity Foundation requesting at least an encouraging letter or telegram that he could show to the feed suppliers (using the letter to guarantee repayment). He wants funding from the Dignity Foundation in order to buy feed to further fatten his pigs. He claims that if he is not given financial support, he will be forced to sell the pigs early, below market price, to get money to live on. “This is a highly important business, as you can see, so please get back to me as quickly as possible” (personal correspondence from Árpád to the Dignity Foundation, 24<sup>th</sup> January 1995). The Dignity Foundation’s response is at this point rather inevitable. The Dignity Foundation writes that they cannot support the second project as 115,844 HUF from the initial 1993 loan remains unaccounted for. “500,000 HUF must be paid back but you have only paid back 35,000 HUF, for which I am thankful. 465,000 HUF is still missing, which you promised in 1994. We added the loss from the theft, but 115,844 HUF is still unaccounted for” (personal correspondence from the Dignity Foundation to Árpád, 26<sup>th</sup> January, 1995).

There follows threats from the Dignity Foundation that they will take Árpád to court, but in the end, Árpád is not punished. The experience was simply filed away as a loss, and a learning experience, by the Dignity Foundation. Zsuzsanna Kovács believes that Árpád had been cheating the Dignity Foundation for a long time. She now realizes that probably half of the money had been distributed to members of the organization and the other half was “stolen”.

Based on this evidence, and drawing on other case studies and ethnographic material, I now discuss the values of the contract, monitoring, trust and extended



family interaction as seen 'on the ground' and attempt to identify points of discord with the Dignity Foundation's philosophy.

#### **4 Trust Revisited**

The issue of trust is intriguing. The contract and monitors are constant reminders of the unique Dignity Foundation philosophy based on their own specific notion of 'trust'. One of Árpád's strategies was to manipulate this preoccupation of the Dignity Foundation's to his advantage. As Árpád's situation further deteriorated and the Dignity Foundation began to show increasing concern about his projects and his continual refusal to account for the money spent or to repay the loan, Árpád wrote a very interesting letter in his defence. As we saw, the Dignity Foundation wrote to Árpád (21<sup>st</sup> December, 1994), specifically asking him to explain the change in membership of the organization (after having received letters of resignation from six members six months after they had been written and signed) and to provide an itemized accounting of 200,000 HUF. Árpád's three-page response manages to avoid accounting for the money. The story surrounding the change in membership, as recounted by Árpád, is an intriguing one, but for now, we shall concentrate on Árpád's manipulation, in this letter, of the contract and the notion of trust. Failing to account for the 200,000 HUF, Árpád instead ends his letter to the programme co-ordinator on this note, "Dear Gábor Vida! I feel that these letters show a lack of trust, and this is actually why I am showing you all the invoices". In fact, part of the contract stipulates that all expenses must be accounted for through invoices that must be sent to the Dignity Foundation within ten days of use. The Dignity Foundation is in no way being unreasonable in requesting these documents, and should not have had to have done so, as the sending of all accounts should be automatic for Árpád. Árpád is cleverly exploiting the value that the Dignity Foundation cherishes so dearly: that of trust. It is interesting to consider how Árpád knew to try to manipulate the 'horizontal' relationship that the Dignity Foundation is trying to nurture. In response to Árpád's initial inquiry, after hearing about the Dignity Foundation through a contact of his (the leader of the foundation for Hungarian National and Ethnic Minorities), the programme coordinator had sent Árpád an encouraging letter and a brochure. "We have sent you one of Dignity Foundation's brochures with this letter in response to your inquiry. Take a look and see if you can see a specific

economic activity that you would like to apply for and if you do, then please do so” (personal correspondence from the Dignity Foundation to Árpád, 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 1993). Perhaps it was in this brochure that Árpád read and remembered the Dignity Foundation’s commitment to building bonds of trust and recalled it in writing this heart-felt letter in which he repeatedly appeals to “Dear Gábor Vida!” The letter is personal in tone, appealing to the ‘soft side’ of Gábor Vida, the programme coordinator, as if trying to distract from the hard facts that he is refusing to account for the 200,000 HUF. The appeal is emotional, removed from the dry terms of the contract.

This lack of trust, which defines a great deal of the community’s relations, explains a great deal of the Epervár *Cigánys*’ attitudes to NGOs. The themes of hostility, crookedness and suspicion extend to the Roma’s assessment of the Dignity Foundation. Elek, based on his personal experiences of the Dignity Foundation, complained that the director of the Dignity Foundation, “just liked beautiful women”. Katalin expressed the opinion that the NGO just “flips a coin to see who to support”. And for Katalin and László and others, who believe the pallet factory leaders to be untrustworthy – they lied to the monitors on their visits to the site – the leaders’ actions are just reconfirming the fact that people are not to be trusted. As we have seen, to be crooked and untrustworthy are particular character traits that dominate popular thinking in Epervár and figures of responsibility, such as the Mayor and NGO leaders, are equally perceived to be motivated by dishonest thoughts and practices. Monitors and contracts have no influence in penetrating this basic sense of distrust.

#### **4.1 Monitoring Revisited**

Monitoring, as discussed, is an important element of the Dignity Foundation performing its own particular philosophy. Treating its Romany clients as potential entrepreneurs with the ambition, talents and abilities to run successful enterprises is an important part of the Dignity Foundation’s ambition to encourage economic and social autonomy among *Cigány* communities. The monitor, by visiting proposed project sites and engaging in discussions with the applicants, is fostering the idea that individual Romany people are capable of initiating successful economic enterprises. However, such a view, an expression of regard or respect for the monitors who bother to journey to visit projects, was never voiced by the



Roma. Rather, the monitor was always seen in terms of power relations: he was ultimately the policeman for the Dignity Foundation. The Dignity Foundation-supported pallet factory leader, who is also in charge of a similar state-funded greenhouse project that involves only financial monitoring visits, believes that it is quite right that the Dignity Foundation sends monitors as, “[t]hey have given us all this money so it is only right that they come to check up on us and see that we are spending it as we said” (pallet factory leader).

This attitude – that monitors are fulfilling a supervisory role – is echoed by Katalin in her criticisms of such programmes. Katalin, a successful entrepreneur within the *Cigány* community, has herself had experiences of a range of NGOs’ community development schemes. In 1997-98, Katalin and her close *testvér* received a loan from a *Cigány*-targeted foundation that was to enable them to rent land on which to grow corn. Eight hectares of land were rented, corn bought, sown and harvested, but the 32,000 kilos of corn that they produced was bought from them for only 1,000 HUF per 100 kilos. Katalin claimed that she was unable to pay back the 300,000 HUF loan as the corn was one-third of the price of the previous year, and the foundation accepted that, due to circumstances beyond Katalin’s control, the loan could not be repaid. For Katalin, the hard work resulted in no profit and so further corn growing ambitions were abandoned. Katalin, who believes the pallet factory to be not much more than an elaborate scam, holds a slightly different view on monitors from that expressed by the pallet factory leader. According to her, the pallet factory received money to employ thirty-five to forty people, but in fact employs only three, while the leaders got rich themselves.<sup>145</sup> She claims that when monitors come on their visits to the pallet factory, the leaders pretend that others are employed, explaining their absence with such lies as “some are out collecting firewood, and the others are out on a delivery”. Katalin believes that the profit should have been distributed amongst all those who signed the contract but, rather than dividing the profits among the thirty-five people, the leaders instead pay their employees the minimum wage (40,000 HUF a month) and keep the remaining profit for themselves and their immediate kin. Katalin does not question the need for monitors, but rather

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<sup>145</sup> In fact, twenty-four people signed the document to declare their presence when the contract was read out and signed, and of these, seven indicated that they would not be involved in the project.

believes that they should play a much greater, more intrusive role in order to prevent the type of situation she describes in the pallet factory.

While Katalin complains in private, upon my prompting, there is no talk of complaining or turning to higher authorities to rectify the situation at the pallet factory. Katalin was never involved in this project, so is not feeling personal insult or loss. The member of Árpád's organization who complained to the Dignity Foundation had a personal stake in the organization, as did those who resigned – all being initial signatories and members of the local minority self-government. Katalin is just a neutral observer slightly piqued by the pallet factory leader's personal success. She believes, like László,<sup>146</sup> that the pallet factory is a charade, and one that continues undetected by monitors. In this way, she is articulating the view that monitors are inspectors, their primary role being to ensure that the leaders of the Dignity Foundation-supported projects do as they promised – fulfil their obligations as laid down in the contract. Katalin suggests that monitors visit every two weeks or live permanently in the village, "like yourself" she told me.<sup>147</sup> Of course, such frequent visits from monitors would destroy the whole concept of trust that the Dignity Foundation is trying so hard to foster. Monitors are supposed to be more than mere police-like figures, but in situations such as those in Epervár, this position is often forced upon them. The Dignity Foundation believes that such embedded monitors would be forced to take sides when ideally they should remain impartial. With the foundation priding itself on its commitment to trust, monitors being conceived of as police-like figures who should ideally be constantly invigilating business practices, highlights the distinct lack of trust at ground level. This issue of trust and how it is manipulated by both parties is a theme running throughout this section and should be considered in relation to the lack of trust between individuals and *testvér* groups in the Epervár settlement.

#### 4.2 The Contract Revisited

As we have seen, it is in times of conflict, when terms of the contract have been broken or brought into question, that the role and importance of the contract becomes clear. In the case of Árpád's organization, the member who accused

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<sup>146</sup> He urged me to go to the pallet factory and ask why the leaders did not employ *Cigánys*, saying that he himself could not ask, but would be interested in what answer they gave me.

<sup>147</sup> Lorenz identifies proximity of business partners as being important in building satisfactory, trusting relationships (1988:207).



Árpád of fraudulent behaviour and telephoned the Dignity Foundation offices to make a complaint was able to do so because he was aware of the terms and conditions of the contract and could therefore identify misbehaviour. For the foundation, proof that the contract has been broken provides a ground for the Dignity Foundation to take offending clients to court to rectify the situation. Recourse to arbitration stems from the fact that contracts are legally binding. The Dignity Foundation experiences with Elek, the leader of an Epervár brick-making project, best illustrates this.<sup>148</sup> In March 1992, Elek received 250,000 HUF from the Dignity Foundation to establish a brick-making (*vályogtéglá*) project and a willow (*fűzfa*) project. The loan was to be repaid in three instalments by August, 1992. He used 100,000 HUF to buy straw (*szalma*) for the bricks and was given land by the minority self-government.

In May, 1992, Elek contacted the Dignity Foundation and asked that he be given one more year to pay back the loan. Both projects hit difficulties – pigs ate the willow and there was no market for the bricks. According to Elek, despite prolific advertizing in the region, he was unable to sell the 2.7 to 2.8 million HUF worth of bricks that he and forty families had made. According to the Dignity Foundation, fake (*hamis*) invoices were sent to the Dignity Foundation, and the visit to the site by a monitor simply consolidated the Dignity Foundation's suspicions that Elek was being dishonest with them. Elek also received 2 million HUF from another foundation and bought a machine to help the brick-making business. Despite this, representatives of the Dignity Foundation who visited the village in February 1993 saw no sign of productivity.

Elek wove his disdain for the Mayor – who as we have seen was an individual generally viewed with disdain and disregard and dismissed as '*zsivány*' – into his narrative of events surrounding his Dignity Foundation-supported brick-making

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<sup>148</sup> Elek was a colourful character who loved to talk about the past and *Cigány* heritage. Even though he was ill from cancer while I was in the village, he continued trying to articulate his plans and ambitions. For example, once he asked me for money so that he could make photocopies of his proposal to develop thermal baths in the village. He planned to develop Epervár into a tourist resort, in the style of the well-established and highly popular nearby town of Szilvaszék. The Epervár local council had refused to hear his proposal at their meeting, so Elek wanted to post copies of it to every resident in the village in the belief that public support would sway the council. In this instance, he blamed the council for being crooked (*zsivány*) in not letting him speak at the meeting and saw his lack of success as a conspiracy.

project. Elek described the Mayor as an untrustworthy and immoral character, whom he blamed for his misfortunes. According to him, he was mistreated and victimized by both the Dignity Foundation and by the Mayor. Elek protests to having had legitimate reasons for being unable to pay back the loan (no market for the bricks) and blames the Mayor for interfering. Elek's version of events is that the local Epervár *Magyars* complained to the Mayor that he was failing to provide them with work in the way that Elek had done for the *Cigánys*. At this point in time, Elek had not paid back the loan in a two-year period, therefore the Mayor, in an act of vindictiveness, contacted the director of the Dignity Foundation director and asked him to take action against Elek. In protest at his unfair treatment, Elek organized a local demonstration against the Mayor. However, the day before the march, fifty skinheads warned Elek off, and so the demonstration never took place.

By June 1993, despite continual promises from Elek that he would repay the 250,000 HUF, still no repayments had been made, so the Dignity Foundation reported Elek to the police later that year. Elek was sued by the Dignity Foundation for embezzlement. He was found to have cheated the Dignity Foundation and was ordered to pay 17,000 HUF, which he did by selling the bricks in 1996.

In certain circumstances, therefore, the Dignity Foundation turns to legal channels to enforce the contract, ensure that loans are paid back, and if not, that the defaulter is punished appropriately. It is very rare that the police are involved though. They are only called in when the Dignity Foundation is completely sure that they have been cheated.

Similarly, the contract is drawn upon by some Romany clients to justify their actions. In one of Árpád's eloquent letters explaining why the business plans had hit renewed obstacles, Árpád refers to the contract and to his obligations therein. He explains how 67,000 HUF of the money from the Dignity Foundation was invested in the cane business venture, while the theft and drought upset his financial situation, therefore leaving him with no profit to divide among his members, as had been agreed. "In the contract, it is stated that the premium was to be shared out between members, but there has been no premium" (personal



correspondence from Árpád to the Dignity Foundation, 10<sup>th</sup> February, 1994). “On the basis of this, I think I can only comply with my obligations according to the facts presented to you”. Árpád is implying that he is fulfilling his obligations as laid down in the contract to the best of his abilities in such difficult circumstances. He continues, “I am sure some members will be unhappy with this” (personal correspondence from Árpád to the Dignity Foundation, 10<sup>th</sup> February 1994). Aware of his obligations to the members of the organization as well as to the Dignity Foundation, Árpád presented a series of unfortunate events as an explanation for why he was unable to distribute a premium.

Members of Árpád’s organization did indeed complain to the Dignity Foundation about the perceived mismanagement of funds. Not only did one member phone the Budapest Dignity Foundation offices accusing Árpád of abusing funds (April 1994), six members of the organization resigned (March 1994), while at least another five asked to be dismissed (February 1994). The six who asked to leave the organization and the man who telephoned in his complaint were both Baloghs, while Árpád is a Rácz. From the correspondence, it is possible to piece together the chain of events as they must have unfolded, but it is impossible to know the intricacies behind the developments. For example, one of the men who resigned was the one that Árpád had signed a contract with to sell the cane (February 1994). Initially, these two had obviously fostered a mutually beneficial relationship and had been capable of working together co-operatively – or at least envisaging such a scenario. In reality, this *Cigány* middle man with the essential cane business networks resigned about three months later. Values of *testvér* undoubtedly played a significant part in these events. However, for the purpose of this analysis, it is enough to consider that those people who felt wronged and cheated turned to the Dignity Foundation to enforce their rights. These people as members of the organization were aware of their rights, obligations and expectations as stipulated in the contract. Zsuzsanna Kovács makes the point that it is only those with connections to the leader, the educated and the informed, who are able to make such complaints.

I now turn my attention to the smaller ‘contract within a contract’. One of the stipulations of the main contract signed by the Dignity Foundation director and the project organizer is, as we saw, that the project leader reads out the contract to



all the members of the organization and that they sign their signatures to confirm that they were present at the reading. Involving the wider organization membership is important when considering the reactions, responses and attitudes to these micro-credit schemes from people in the settlement. As we saw above, in Árpád's case, members were in a position to complain to the Dignity Foundation as they were aware of the details of the contract: their rights and expectations. These people, as was noted above, were also those with the social capital to complain. The Dignity Foundation's experience is, as we shall see below, that the reading of the contract generally leads to inter-community resentment. People hear that there is a new exciting and money-generating activity about to take place, and realize that they are not benefiting from it, and so the distrust and resentment grows.

Of course, signatures on paper do not guarantee that a meeting was actually held. Melinda spoke of being approached by Elek and asked if she would sign a sheet of paper with the promise that if she did so, she would receive her share of the proceeds. Melinda attended no meeting and did not speak of any intentions or plans of working, but expressed anger that she had never received any money. This she once claimed was her reason for refusing to greet or associate with the close *testvér* group of which this, now elderly, man was the head.<sup>149</sup> "Look at him walking up and down alone. Why is that? Because no one wants to speak to him". In Melinda's opinion, he was "*zsivány*" (crooked). From my experiences in the field, I would question the authenticity of the document provided by Árpád with its 64 signatures. To persuade that many people from all the different extended family (*testvér*) groups to congregate in the village to listen to someone read out the rather dry terms and conditions of a contract would be nigh on impossible. Reviewing the original signatories of the contract, Zsuzsanna Kovács believes that the same hand was used to write several of the signatures and she is sure that not all of these people whose names are on the contract were included in the activities of the enterprise. This ambivalence to the contract is not surprising considering the alternative methods to ensure cooperation employed by the Roma in economic deals discussed in chapter four.

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<sup>149</sup> Although I was also told that the lack of greetings was due to a disagreement between Melinda and Erika (Elek's daughter-in-law).



### 4.3 Testvér

The concept and associated values of extended family (*testvér*) and trust (the lack of it), central concepts that were explored in previous chapters, play prominent roles in how community development projects are perceived by the Roma. One of the central accusations levied at the pallet factory leaders was that they were *zsivány* because all their *Cigány* employees were *testvér*. As we saw above, even László, angry at the pallet factory owners for apparently only employing *testvér*, would himself have employed close *testvér* if he ever successfully established a business with Dignity Foundation support. László's business would therefore have been just as open to criticism as the pallet factory. The local concept of relatedness, with its contradictory nature, permeates Epervár Romany life, including business strategies.

The Dignity Foundation, in trying to fulfil its mission of building civil society, aims to work with associations, rather than families. However, in Epervár, there is little evidence that this ambition is achieved. In Árpád's case, representatives from every family branch (Rácz, Balogh, etc.) signed the initial document as members of the organization who had attended the reading, and witnessed the signing, of the contract. Yet it becomes clear to the Dignity Foundation over the course of its relationship with Árpád that this Epervár *Cigány* organization was no more than a vehicle for Árpád and his close *testvér*, a fact that he makes no effort to hide from the Dignity Foundation. Following the resignation of at least six of the members of the organization – all Baloghs – Árpád, as requested by the Dignity Foundation, writes a letter to explain the situation. He writes that eight of the members left, but that they did not do so “in anger”, but rather to establish their own organization. In March, following these resignations, a minority self-government election was held in which two of these eight stood as candidates at which, due to *testvér* support, Árpád was confident of winning.

The absolute power and influence that Árpád enjoys can be garnered from this explanation of events. A proud declaration of vote rigging to ‘punish’ dissidents as President of the local minority self-government, leader of the *Cigány* project and recipient of Dignity Foundation funds is, from a pro-civil sector viewpoint, a peculiar defence in the face of suspicion into personal conduct. Árpád's logic is

that, for him, extended family (*testvér*) is a legitimate source of support. Árpád's project was rooted in values of *testvér* which, for him, is about trust. For the Dignity Foundation, it seemed to be no more than a family affair.



## Conclusion

Following the system change Hungarian Roma have found themselves increasingly isolated from mainstream society. At the local level, opportunities to interact, such as playing football together as children and working together as adults, have diminished, leading to increased segregation at this village level. In respect to schooling, Epervár is special in that the local school continues to teach children in mixed classes. With children attending the same nursery, from an early age the education system provides an arena for local interaction. However, school-based friendships rarely translate into out-of-school relationships. The contrast between the number of marriages between non-Roma and *Cigánys* that used to take place compared to the number of such marriages today illustrates this. For example, Zsolt, László and the deceased man whose funeral I attended while in the field, had all married *Magyar* women as their first wives (although these relationships all broke up, and the men went on to marry *Cigánys*). In today's environment, there are few opportunities for Roma and non-Roma even to meet in order to establish a relationship and, other than Tibor, no young *Cigánys* were involved in relationships with *Magyars*. With many feeling that the quality of life in the settlement is on a downward slope, migration to Canada, a journey that involves mobilizing scarce resources to arrive at an uncertain destination, is considered the most viable option for some. It is against this background that the Dignity Foundation is working in Epervár with the aim of promoting civil society through supporting income-generation projects that will both raise the economic and social position of Roma and, through productive work, reduce the prejudices between Roma and non-Roma.

As this thesis has demonstrated, despite the enterprise-driven nature of life in the settlement, the Dignity Foundation's programmes have stumbled. The striking feature of this failure of the Dignity Foundation community development schemes to make an impact in the community is that, while the Roma successfully partake in local economic initiatives and respect obligations of loan repayment to each other, when the Dignity Foundation becomes involved in local enterprises, problems arise and the loan instalments are not repaid (except in the pallet factory case). Following the lack of success of supported projects in the village, the foundation had decided not to support any more cane business proposals. This

decision was made despite the fact that caning is a regular activity for the settlement inhabitants and so conceivably one that should not hit difficulties (although the ground not freezing over is a common problem that delays caning). However, whenever caning was supported by the foundation, loans were not repaid. This pattern of the Dignity Foundation's loans not being repaid leads one to question how this could be the case in a locality where the Roma have a well-developed lending culture. A significant feature of this local lending culture is that people do not charge interest for loans. This is in contrast to other Hungarian Romany settlements where high interest rates on loans from local money-lenders result in an inability to pay. Romany refugees from Central and Eastern Europe often cite loan sharks as one of the reasons for having to flee their home – fearing reprisals for their inability to pay back the interest-laden loan. Another aspect to the culture of borrowing and repayment is Romany women's sophisticated use of pawnshops in Szilvaszék and Debrecen. Gold is a treasured possession, not only as an indicator of prestige and high social status, but as a constant source of cash. Women pawn their gold when they need access to money quickly (for example, when László was hospitalized, or when he wanted to buy a car to go hamstering) and they always make sure that they retrieve the gold (paying the interest on the loan) before the pawnshop imposed three month time limit has expired. In these transactions, women demonstrate a canny awareness of the lending process. It is interesting that the Dignity Foundation has failed to inspire the same respect for its own lending scheme. In trying to understand how this has come about, this thesis considered the lived experiences of a marginalized rural *Romungro* community in the context of the recent post-socialist trend of encouraging civil society. Before addressing the question of why the NGO and the Roma of Epervár have found productive collaboration so difficult, we need, briefly, to consider the possibility that the Roma today are forming an underclass cut off from all possibilities of social and economic interaction with the outside world. For if this were the case, all the efforts of the NGO would be utterly in vain.

While discrimination limits the opportunities open to many Roma, it is not possible in the Epervár case to conclude that they are part of an emerging underclass. To view the Epervár *Cigány* as pure victims would be to overlook their ingenuity, initiative and enterprise. One of the most notable differences between Epervár and other localities is that, among the residents of the Romany



settlement in Epervár there are signs of innovation and entrepreneurship that rely on contacts with *Magyars* that differ from the more passive and hierarchical patron-client relationships reported in the other case studies (Durst, 2002, (*Romungro*) and Fleck and Virág, 1999, (Beash)) where the authors believe they see something more like underclass emerging. In Epervár, these relationships appear to be instigated by the Roma in a much more dynamic atmosphere to a more beneficial end (Roma in the case studies quoted sometimes receive payment in food or clothes, and sometimes receive nothing whereas the Epervár Roma work for cash). It is also interesting, however, to note that Fleck and Virág (1999) categorize “people that give up” as people who, amongst other things, take part in casual labour (collect snails, gather mushrooms, plant saplings) as additional income to social aid, in differentiation to those that participate in local power and those that change strategy by breaking off communal relations and giving up their Romany mother tongue. The difference in the groups that Fleck and Virág and I are writing about is apparent (historically, linguistically and culturally), but I wish to focus on the idea that for the Epervár Roma, organizing a hamstering team involves skill, initiative resources and leadership. For the Epervár Roma taking part in such additional income-generating activities is not about giving up, but rather about moving forwards (and it may, of course, be that that the difference between my and these other studies is more of analytic approach than ethnographic fact). While Ladányi and Szelényi (1998) identify in-migration to impoverished, isolated, Romany communities as a feature of the formation of a Romany underclass, people want to move to Epervár for its economic prosperity, as can be seen by the high number of people moving into the settlement to marry (see Appendix). This is not contributing to a poverty trap, but rather strengthening the community, as can be seen by the benefits to the local economy of Donata’s Romanian relatives working for Katalin and Melinda’s sons from Szilvaszék providing her with goods to sell. However, despite questioning the validity of the underclass model, I argue that there are still barriers to these activities, that for the majority ethnic affiliation remains an unsurpassable barrier in business circles, but that there is life and innovation and an embracing of the new social and economic climate that the Roma have found themselves in. Daily life is a struggle, but these Roma are managing to carve a niche for themselves.

Evidence presented in this thesis supports the proposition that, as Vajda (2002) wrote, *Romungro* do have a strong *Cigány* consciousness. They have a distinct value system that informs their world view and distinguishes them from mainstream culture. Despite past assimilationist policy and the recent conflation of the ethnic and social dimensions of the Romany situation, this group of Hungarian Roma do not want to be called *Magyars*. Unlike other Romany groups, the Epervár *Romungro* do not hold negative views of inferior *Magyar* culture, indeed they would welcome improved relations with local *Magyars*, but there is no sense that the Epervár *Cigány* would want to compromise on their sense of self. Despite the ambiguity of being *Cigány* and appreciation by some Roma of some of the characteristics of *Magyar* life (see Katalin's earlier comment that the Rácz are the superior family branch as they "go after" the *Magyars* in terms of economic mobility), there is great pride and allegiance to *Cigány* identity.

Horváth and Prónai (2000) discuss whether *Romungro* have abandoned their 'traditional' lifestyle and are now halfway on their journey to total assimilation, or alternatively that this 'halfway' state (neither *Magyar* nor Vlach Roma) could be interpreted as a permanent state in which *Romungro* will remain, never to be fully accepted by majority society. Neither of these explanations is satisfactory to the authors who prefer to focus on ethnographic evidence to address the issue, rather than rely on a "fictive" past and unforeseeable future. In their conclusion, having closely examined the local concepts of "grimy" and "touchy",<sup>150</sup> Horváth and Prónai (2000) reach a similar conclusion to my own in stating that *Romungro* women are constantly demonstrating their *Cigány* identity by conforming to their own standard of cleanliness which, while influenced by *Magyar* standards, is particular to the Romany community. This analysis of hygiene rules complements Horváth's (forthcoming) argument that Roma "Gypsify" the workplace, and in doing so confirm and solidify their sense of self under working conditions that would be an affront to more 'traditional' Vlach Roma. *Romungro* have robust cultural strategies of their own that they are proud to be part of. *Romungro* are therefore a distinct Romany group, albeit different in many respects to other Romany groups, that must be understood and respected by civil sector actors working in this field.

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<sup>150</sup> Translation from Hungarian to English authors' own (private communication).



As the evidence presented in the first chapter demonstrated, there is a need for positive intervention to address the inequality of opportunity that Roma face. In post-communist Hungary, with the third sector taking a bigger responsibility in welfare issues, NGOs have responded to the situation by addressing the needs of the Roma. Many of these NGOs, established by ideologically motivated individuals and supported by western donors and multinational agencies, are transferring the models and philosophies of the west in their efforts to improve the situation of the Roma. However, as this thesis has demonstrated, there is a schism between the ideologies and values of the NGOs working in this field, and those of the Romany communities. The lack of consensus between the Dignity Foundation and the Epervár project participants, captured in the case studies, best illustrates this gulf. Civil society (as interpreted by the Hungarian third sector), with its roots in particular constructions of trust, cooperation and dialogue expressed in the strategies of contractual obligations and monitoring, is at odds with aspects of Romany life. For example, working relations between non-*testvér* and *Magyars* rely on strategies such as gift-giving, passing, and lending and dealing which create personal ties imbued with the ethos of '*testvér*' values, while for the NGO it is the impersonal, written contract that signifies a working partnership. That the Roma do not respect the contract as the NGO assume is one facet of the misunderstanding between the two parties.

Despite the *bricoleur* nature of Romany culture and the continual negotiation between the categories *Magyar* and *Cigány*, the Roma's value system consolidates their unique identity of which they are proud. For example, to be *Cigány* means an open home and hospitality to visitors, moral integrity reflected in a high level of cleanliness, and performance of gender. Perhaps the most significant aspect of *Cigány* identity is allegiance to *testvér*, and it is this that conflicts markedly with community development schemes rooted in non-*testvér* cooperation. This thesis has attempted to elucidate the complexity of this allegiance by detailing the extent to which it is based on situation and context. For the Epervár Roma, networks of *testvér* are networks of trust, and are therefore incompatible with civic associations based on cross-*testvér* cooperation.

## Playing the Game

The metaphor of 'playing the game' has been touched upon previously in this thesis: it seemed an appropriate way of understanding some of the situations I observed and participated in while in the field, and is a metaphor that Zsuzsanna Kovács also used to understand the Dignity Foundation's experiences in Epervár. Pinnock (1999), noting a similar strategy among Romany-led Bulgarian NGOs, interpreted such game playing as a form of everyday resistance. Her exploration of the development of Romany-led and Romany-targeted NGOs in post-socialist Bulgaria focuses on Bulgarian Roma who are directly involved in civil society, and therefore presents itself as an interesting comparison to this thesis. Like Reynolds (2003), Pinnock is questioning a simplified analysis of the 'transition' and the discourse surrounding the development of civil society, and proposes there being a "hidden transcript" (Scott, 1985) within the NGO sector (1999:18). Pinnock (1999) suggests that Romany civil sector workers 'play with' western concepts, such as 'bottom up participation' in much the same way as the director of the Dignity Foundation considers some of the Hungarian Romany project participants 'play with' the NGO and its ideologies. Like the NGOs discussed in Pinnock's thesis (1999), Árpád was "playing the game" (Zsuzsanna Kovács), in realizing exactly what he needed to say, the language and approach that was necessary, to capture the interest and investment of the Dignity Foundation. This is best illustrated in the heart-felt letter that was written by Árpád in which he entreated the foundation to respect the trust that they were nurturing. He learnt the skills, the application procedure, how to type, the language of the NGO, and applied them successfully in his dealings with the foundation. Once he had secured the funding, he did not however use the money as agreed, but invested according to private priorities.

This phenomenon has been widely recognized at the level of organizations that are equally as keen as Árpád to secure money from available resources. Local NGOs utilize appropriate terminology in order to secure funding from western organizations. There are, for example, certain "buzzwords" that will secure funding from international organizations: civil society, community development, empowerment. "'Civil society' is just part of 'project speak'" (Sampson, 1998:4). Such terminology implies a specific ideology and the importation of certain practices, however these 'best practices' are rather reconfigured by local cultural



formations and historical experiences (Dunn, 1999). In the case of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, this dynamic process has led to social commentators thinking in terms of ‘transformation’ rather than ‘transition’ (see Stark and Bruszt, 1998; Mandel and Humphrey, 2002).

While Árpád played the game competently, Zsuzsanna Kovács makes the observation that it was the brick-maker Elek who was the more intelligent. Elek had long-term ambitions for the local Roma, understanding the wider political, social and economic situation. For example, he once organized a team of British young athletes from Manchester to visit the village. Katalin recalls cooking vegetarian food for the visitors, and Elek showed me press reports of the trip. It had been planned that a group from the village would visit Manchester in return, but financial problems meant that this return visit never took place. Although his dreams of creating the first *Cigány* Olympics, publishing his book and building a spa in the village were never realized, his plans were those of a man who thought beyond the parameters of Epervár settlement life. Due to her long relationship with the community, Zsuzsanna Kovács knows the inhabitants well and could see that Elek was an extremely intelligent and thoughtful man, in a way that Árpád was not, but Elek was “ahead of his time” (Zsuzsanna Kovács) and did not apply his wit to the Dignity Foundation challenge.

To ‘play the game’ in this context has a slightly malicious connotation to it, especially when situated in the discourse of whom the game was ‘against’. Zsuzsanna Kovács pondered such a question: “Were all the villagers in collusion? Had it all been one big game from beginning to end with all the cousins and members of the organization working together against the Dignity Foundation? Were they simply cheating the Gadjos?” On a visit to Epervár she had been surprised to see everyone at the funeral of a local Rom, with those who had been complaining so vigorously about each other coming together as *testvér* on this occasion. This led her to question whether it had all been one big set up with everyone in collusion. I argue that it is not the case that there was a deliberate or orchestrated plan to fool the Dignity Foundation. As I hope has become clear, relations of *testvér* are, to a large extent, dependent on situation – on context. Therefore, the man who complained that his corn was stolen by someone who

later emerged to be *testvér* at the funeral in no way affects the sincerity of his behaviour in either of the situations.

One interpretative possibility is to describe Roma practices as a survival strategy of complicity and resistance. As explored in the first chapter, during state socialism there was a degree of resistance to forced assimilation by the Roma. For example, men continued to go hamstering despite the restrictions of working at the cooperative farm, and women continued to stay at home and look after their children. Now in post-socialist Epervár, as this thesis has illustrated, Roma continue to assert their identity as an ethnic group, while negotiating their position in mainstream society, as Zsuzsanna Kovács thought they were doing in relation to the Dignity Foundation. It might, in this fashion, be possible to extend Pinnock's (1999) theory that such 'playing' is a form of resistance and a new survival strategy within the Romany-staffed NGOs to the situation in Epervár. The NGOs both comply and resist, for example, using abstract, donor-friendly terms in order to secure precious funds that are then directed to causes that the NGOs deem important. A similar attitude is discernable among Dignity Foundation project applicants and project participants. I suggest that the participants view the NGO in much the same light as the Romany-staffed NGOs view donor organizations: as a tool of conforming to majority society that can be manipulated for the good of community, while resisting the undesirable aspects. In 'playing the game' the Epervár Roma are both resisting the values of the NGO and exploiting the opportunity to access money. The Dignity Foundation's lack of success in encouraging civil society within the Epervár Romany community can be understood in the context of it being an imposed ideology upon a people who respect allegiance to *testvér* above everything else. For a people fluent in everyday forms of resistance, the tactic of compliance and resistance is a familiar one.

Is this to say, as some would have it, that Roma are unfit for civil society? Not if we were to follow Koulis (2001) who argues that while Hungarian Roma may lack the social capital for collective action, they want to be involved in civil society. Evidence presented by Koulis (2001) shows that despite the Roma lacking many of the characteristics Putnam (1993) identified as being prerequisite for engagement in civil society, Hungarian Roma have the desire and ability to partake in the civil sector. The Dignity Foundation's strategy of fostering



horizontal relationships built on trust is not dissimilar to the state policy of encouraging local civic associations through minority self-governments, and there are therefore parallels in the failures of the two strategies. The frustration in the ineffectiveness of minority self-governments discussed previously is approached as an issue of *trust* by Koulis (2001). By failing to tackle the issues that local Roma want the minority self-governments to be involved in (social support and economic development), the Roma feel further alienated and disenfranchised. In this analysis, trust is seen as a basic building block of civic attachment, and is approached in terms of the relationship between the local minority self-government and the Roma electorate. This thesis has demonstrated a similar scenario in Epervár: frustration and mistrust of the local minority self-government and how this is inter-related with a general feeling of mistrust towards people, especially non-*testvér*. Schafft (2000) draws a similar conclusion in his analysis of levels of trust, both within Romany communities and between the local *Cigány* population and the local *Magyars*, when he concludes that “community cohesiveness and norms of trust and reciprocity at the local level are positively associated with the institutional capacity” of local minority self-governments (2000:35).<sup>151</sup> The danger with this sort of argument is that it all too easily comes to seem as if the victim can be blamed for bringing values to a situation, when in fact external circumstances are playing a major, constraining role. Such explanations share ground with the culture of poverty theory, with the new discourse arguing that the poor are stuck in poverty because they lack social capital and are trapped in a cycle of distrust, while successful communities have a wealth of social capital and well-developed norms of trust and reciprocity (Schafft and Brown, forthcoming). If we were to follow Schafft (2000), we would tend to see Epervár as an example of a community with low levels of trust, and then take this as an explanation for the failure of the Dignity Foundation and the local minority self-government to effectively engage with the settlement inhabitants. My evidence suggests something else: that in Epervár trust does exist, as does civil society, but not in the form that Schafft (2000) or the NGO concerned here recognizes. Since 2000, Schafft has modified his argument to consider the “social relationships that reinforce and reproduce inequality”, reminding himself and other theorists to consider the “underlying political, economic and social systems” and so questioning the appropriateness of social capital as an explanatory variable

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<sup>151</sup> See also Schafft and Brown (2000).

in the case of the Hungarian Roma who have a “history of social exclusion, discrimination, and persecution” (Schafft and Brown, forthcoming). In this thesis I have commented on the “character” (Schafft and Brown, forthcoming) of local network ties, arguing that appreciation of local forms of cooperation and trust is essential for outside agencies working with Roma.

I argue that trust does exist in Epervár but in a form that differs to other versions. Trust plays a central role in the discourse surrounding civil society as cooperation is predicated on trust (Gambetta, 1988:i) and civil society is rooted in voluntary association and local level cooperation. For cooperation to emerge however, irrespective of collective interest, there must be a degree of trust between parties (Gambetta, 1988:i). In this thesis, I have touched upon several differing views of trust, in particular trust as conceived by the Dignity Foundation and by the Romany locals. For the foundation, trust is a belief in individuals’ capacities and abilities, manifested in the lending of money in the confidence that the loan will be repaid. The Dignity Foundation recognizes that the Hungarian Romany minority has been deprived of this form of trust by mainstream society and its institutions, and is addressing this issue by working in partnership with Roma.

However, this thesis has shown that there is a lack of trust between the foundation and the local project participants, leading to non-cooperative relationships. One possible explanation for this could be the absence of shared values. Lorenz introduces the concept of the “moral contract” as forming the basis of relations of partnership between business parties, defining partnership as “a set of normative rules, determining what behaviour is permissible and what constitutes a violation of trust” (Lorenz, 1988:206). I suggest that between the Epervár Roma and the Dignity Foundation there is no moral contract as there is a lack of shared normative rules. While the Dignity Foundation stresses an idea of communal business, the project participants stress *testvér* allegiance. For the Dignity Foundation, trust is about horizontal, personal relationships with minimal emphasis on incentives. The founder of the Dignity Foundation stresses that Romany project participants are not asked for any collateral because that would be counter-productive to the notion of fostering trust. Not asking for collateral is part of the Dignity Foundation’s strategy to convey to the Romany participants that the NGO trusts the Roma and it is anticipated that the Roma will respond to this with



“trust and self-respect” (Bálint Antal).<sup>152</sup> However, the founder is talking of a specific form of trust that is irrelevant to the Epervár Roma. In addition, Hungarian Roma, as the first chapter explored, have no reason to trust formal bodies, and confidence in the system and trust in partners are interlinked (Luhmann, 1988:99). Bearing in mind the marginalized position of the Hungarian Romany community, it is appropriate to consider Pagden’s assertion that “no central agency is capable of intentionally creating trust where none previously or independently existed” (1988:127). And while Lorenz disagrees, believing that trust can be created deliberately, he stresses the importance of shared values in the creation of trust (1988:209). The lack of shared values between the Dignity Foundation and the Romany participants is one explanation for the failure of the foundation to effectively introduce its own concept of trust into a community that functions with different values.

The Romany project participants, while at times able to appreciate and manipulate trust as defined by the Dignity Foundation, live according to their own value system based on allegiance to *testvér*, and lending and dealing as strategies of forming cooperative relations between non-*testvér*. In the absence of shared values, one possible strategy to reduce the ambiguity of situations is good communication (Good, 1988:36 and Lorenz, 1988:207). However, the Dignity Foundation monitors who are employed precisely to perform such a task (trying to create “thick trust” where none exists (Williams, 1988:8)), are viewed as inspectors by the locals, rather than people with whom to build a mutually beneficial partnership. This lack of consensus in the meaning of the word trust, both in the field (the different meaning of trust for the NGO compared to the meaning for the Roma) and in academic usage, and the apparent inability of the Dignity Foundation to foster its concept of trust, has significant implications for the growth of civil society as envisaged by Hungarian civil sector actors.

The Dignity Foundation is an example of just one Hungarian NGO working in the field of civil society development. Considering the evidence presented in this thesis, it may be questionable if it is possible to build cross-community ties in a culture primarily defined by allegiance to *testvér*. Nikolay Kirilov (Executive

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<sup>152</sup> Dasgupta identifies suitable punishment for breaking agreements or contracts as a necessary incentive in transactions (1988:49-50).

Director of the international NGO Pakiv) has argued that it is possible to design an enterprise-based community development scheme that fulfils the aim of community cooperation, despite the chasms created by allegiance to *testvér*. He has developed such a scheme from the Dignity Foundation's micro-credit model that he believes will avoid the major pit falls identified in this thesis. His pig-breeding project will take place in one of the Romany neighbourhoods in the Bulgarian town of Lom. Pigs will be lent in kind by the church to the Romany project participants and the participants will have to repay the church by returning the pig – for example a pig from the first successful litter.<sup>153</sup> What is particular in this instance is that the church has been very carefully chosen by Nikolay Kirilov to be the project leader as it is the one respected institution that unites all strata and dimensions of the neighbourhood. There are various spheres of influence within this Romany neighbourhood, as in Epervár, yet the church cuts across these. Divisions of *testvér* fall secondary to the unifying might of the church. Each situation is different, but in each case it is imperative to identify the institution, or person, or forum that joins the parties. Nikolay Kirilov is able to identify the bridging factor in Lom as he knows the community intimately. By identifying the mistakes and successes of other NGO programmes, Pakiv is able to consider how these could be adapted to create the best possible conditions for facilitating community development projects. Perhaps the same could be done for Epervár, but with no neutral building component the task is a difficult one.

It is therefore perhaps best that we approach this from another angle. We must reconsider both the strategies used to import civil society, and the model of civil society itself. It is insightful to separate civil society from the buzz words and ideologies of the western development world (which the Dignity Foundation is rooted in). Equating “civil society with Western style NGOs is good for getting grants, but not always for building social self-organization or constructing a civilized society” (Sampson, 1998:13).<sup>154</sup> As discussed above, the Roma may lack the skills and tools for effective involvement in civic life, but they do want to be involved in local issues (Koulis, 2001:5). With this desire for involvement, there is potential for the existing informal networks to play a role in civil society.

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<sup>153</sup> Lending in kind is a familiar mutation of the micro-credit model. See for example Heifer Project International via [www.heifer.org](http://www.heifer.org)

<sup>154</sup> The two kinds of civil society that Sampson is interested in (1998).



The Epervár material suggests that Putnam's reaction against uncivil kinship and allegiance networks should be reconsidered (Putnam, 2000). Interpreting allegiance to *testvér* as 'uncivil' and therefore a barrier in the creation of civil society is an unconstructive way of viewing the situation. As discussed above, to suggest that Roma lack the social capital to adopt the strategies needed for civil society and are therefore trapped in a backward social structure that values 'primordial' loyalties, is misguided and unhelpful. Instead, an effective strategy needs to be designed that takes into consideration local conditions. By focusing on social capital, in the sense of extra-kin networks and the 'lack' of it, commentators are failing to question the source of economic disadvantages (Fine, 2001, Schafft and Brown, forthcoming). Sampson identifies imagination as being a key component in approaches as to how to work flexibly and effectively with local informal networks. He stresses that there is a need for humanitarian organizations to re-examine their views of "primordial loyalties" (1998:14). "We need to view these social ties not simply as obstacles but as possibilities for action. Under what conditions can ethnicity, kin and family become *options* rather than *pressures*?" (Sampson, 1998:14). The skills and strategies that the Roma use in their income-generating activities demonstrate that the Roma are successfully able to negotiate their position. For example, once László effectively used both his ethnicity and his disability to elicit sympathy from a non-Romany landowner; at other times he initiated deals in the settlement; and he also organized a hamstering team of *Cigány* men to work under his leadership. László positively shaped his own life. The fluidity and complexity of *Cigány* identity was used to great effect by Katalin who was able to use both her ability to pass and her connections to the *Cigány* settlement to her advantage in business. In dealing with *Magyars* she was able to secure employment and, because of her position in settlement life, could then assemble a large group of willing Romany workers.

Nikolay Kirilov, in Bulgaria, has imaginatively devised a strategy that he hopes will place extended family allegiances secondary to allegiance to the church. He is able to do this because of his embedded position in the community: he possesses "information not known to outsiders that is necessary for program success" (Holt, 1991).<sup>155</sup> Presently, Dignity Foundation participants participate in designing their

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<sup>155</sup> Holt identifies this as one of the conditions for participation as a necessary component of effective and sustainable poverty reduction programmes (Holt, 1991).

business/livelihood enterprise, but they are unable to participate in designing the organizational structure of the enterprise. A prerequisite for obtaining Dignity Foundation funding is the establishment of an association, but as this thesis demonstrates, such an association is no guarantee that cross-extended family cooperation will be encouraged. "Models are good to think with" (Sampson, 1998:14), but to export models on to social groups can be unhelpful. Rather, with the Dignity Foundation currently re-assessing its main aims and strategies, the Dignity Foundation should take this opportunity to reassess its work. The micro-credit model should be used to think about how best to facilitate community development in Hungarian Romany communities. Associations may not be the key. Rather, the values of the community should be considered. When entering into an agreement, one needs to look at the world from the perspective the party one is entering into agreement with (Dasgupta, 1988:51). The end result could well be imaginative strategies for working with the local concept of *testvér* in a way that would benefit the long-term development of the Romany community. Civil society as perceived by the international donors and the Hungarian third sector will need to be reconfigured.

Considering the findings of this thesis, I suggest that NGOs working in the field of community development should reconsider the emphasis and appropriateness of civil society, and instead appreciate and work with local values to have any chance of effective dialogue. Involving the community implies not only 'grass root participation' in the local application of the project, but community involvement at the embryonic stages. By initiating effective dialogue with the Roma, the issue of the community's strategy of playing the game as a form of resistance would not be relevant as the Roma would not feel that their lifestyle was being threatened by an outside agency imposing alien values. An eagerness for Romany communities to be involved in civic initiatives has been identified, but the frameworks in which these initiatives have so far been set (minority self-governments and NGO-led community development schemes) have failed to successfully involve local populations.

Addressing the question of how best to involve local Romany communities in third sector development projects is the next step in this field of investigation. To this end, it would be interesting to revisit Nikolay Kirilov's pig-breeding project



in Lom to see if the church had managed to successfully bridge the opposing extended family factions in the town. And where bridging is not the solution, a dynamic new approach that works with *testvér* networks as the building blocks of development projects could provide the answer.

## Appendix

### List of Characters

(in alphabetical order with their position on the kinship diagram)

Albert - B	Róbert - C
András - A	Rózsi - D
Áron - B	Tamás - C
Árpád - C	Tibor - B
Barbara - B	Zita - A
Bence - B	Zoltán - A
Dani - D	Zsolt - D
Dávid - D	
Donata - A	
Elek - B	
Erika - B	
Gazsi - A	
István - D	
Jancsi - C	
János - C	
József - C	
Judit - D	
Károly - C	
Katalin - A	
Kitti - D	
László - D	
Lívi - C	
Maria - B	
Melinda - D	
Mihály - C	
Nórbi - D	
Ödön - B	
Orsolya - D	
Péter - D	
Rita - C	





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